UNDER THE GREEN CANOPY



AFRO ASIAN BOOK CLUB PAKISTAN

...tions from Contemporary Creative Writings of Pakista...

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Selections from Contemporary Creative Writings of Pakistan

THE EDITORS

AFRO-ASIAN BOOK CLUB
Pakistan

The Afro-Asian Book Club Pakistan is a non-profit association dedicated to the dissemination of Afro-Asian literature to an Afro-Asian audience. Its avowed aim is to bring about cultural understanding among the peoples of Afro-Asia by an intelligent understanding of the emotions, currents, undercurrents of the vastly panoramic Afro-Asian society.

The Afro-Asian Book Club is strictly non-political, with emphasis on creative works of outstanding merit. Each country in Africa and Asia has two editors represented on the Board of Editors, who select and edit the volumes devoted to their respective country. The Central Board of Editors exercises no discretion on the selection or the merit of works sent by the National Board of Editors. The Central Board, however, has the necessary privilege of editing out portions if the pressure of space makes it essential.

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The editors acknowledge the editorial and copy editing services rendered by Yasmin Hosain and Riaz Hassan.

THE EDITORS

MR. JUSTICE S.A. RAHMAN, poet, critic, essayist, patron of arts, judge of the Pakistan Supreme Court.

PROF. AHMED ALI, poet, novelist, critic, educationist, one-time diplomat.

PROF. SIRAJUDDIN, essayist, critic, educationist, Professor of English Literature at the Punjab University.

DR. ALI AHSAN, poet, critic, essayist, educationist, Director of the Bengali Academy, Dacca, and Secretary-General of the Pakistan's PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists) Club.

QAVI JASIMUDD-DIN, internationally famous poet, educationist.

NASIR AHMAD FAROOKI, novelist, playwright, journalist, and the Executive Editor of the Book Club.

THE AUTHORS

ALAUDDIN AL-AZAD [*The Rains*]. Bengali playwright, novelist, and short story writer, his skill and daring as an artist has won him great prestige at home and abroad. The sheer craft of his fiction is moving in its appeal, and he would easily rank among the outstanding creative artists of Asia.

SAADAT HASAN MANTO [*Nothing But The Truth*]. d. 1955, Urdu playwright, short story writer, essayist, he is undoubtedly the greatest Urdu story writer of the previous two decades. His daring, skill, and the exuberance of his personal

life won him immortality in his lifetime. He wrote about the rejected segments of society with moving honesty, and smashed gods of perfidy and sham.

AHMED ALI [*Ocean Of Night*]. Writing in English, novelist, short story writer, poet, one-time diplomat, won international acclaim with his novels and poems. This excerpt from his novel of the same name, is a probe into the forces of Muslim culture in the sub-continent.

MUNIER CHOWDHURY [*The Wooden Sandals*]. Bengali playwright, critic, short story writer, teaches at Dacca University. His plays have won international repute, and his short stories, dealing mostly with rural life, are a valiant plea for the victims of petty traders.

BILQEES JEHAN [*Life And Lamentation*]. Urdu writer of versatile talent, novelist and translator, musician and poet, married, and has travelled extensively. Her works reflect satire and high seriousness, and a fervent longing to study life and death.

NASIR AHMAD FAROOKI [*The Exalted Bourgeois !*]. Writing in English, novelist, playwright, former foreign correspondent and editor, won wide acclaim with his first novel in 1961. This excerpt is from the forthcoming novel *Woman In Sorrow*, a vivid study of the inane intelligentsia messily cutting its own throat.

SHAHID ALI [*Gabriel's Wings*]. Bengali novelist, short story writer, and politician ; his inspiration from the religious environment is significant, but this deep faith has not been clouded by sentimentalism.

A. HAMID [*The Chasm*]. Urdu's prolific novelist, short story writer, script writer for the films, his portrayal of the lower middle class has won him a large mass readership, and acceptance by the literary circles of Lahore.

SHAUKAT OSMAN [*The Quilt*]. Bengali playwright and short story writer, teaches at Dacca College. His depiction of

real life, his sympathy for the oppressed, and his flowing prose has won him wide acclaim at home and abroad.

MUMTAZ MUFTI [*The Frozen Spark*]. Urdu novelist, playwright, short story writer, and publicist, he gained literary fame with this story ; a sensitive, suffocating portrayal of middle class Muslim social perspective.

ABU RUSHD [*The Table Was Laid*]. Bengali poet, novelist, short story writer, and playwright, teaches at the university. His writings have been marked with brilliant wit, and of arresting the sharp nuances of urban life.

AHMAD NADEEM QASMI [*The Unwanted*]. Urdu novelist, poet, short story writer, journalist, and editor, he came into fame with his charming description of rural life of the Punjab. He portrayed the village, as no artist has, and his defiant fearlessness endeared him to a whole generation of writers.

ABU JAFAR SHAMSUDDIN [*The Leader*]. Bengali novelist, critic, short story writer, currently with Bengali Academy, Dacca, won critical acclaim before independence, but flowered into fame with stories written in the 50's. A deep urge to study characters, set against East Pakistan's rural life, is his principal hallmark.

ZEBUN-NISSA HAMIDULLAH [*No Music Before Mosque*]. Writing in English, poetess, short story writer, essayist, columnist, editor, and housewife, her sensitive portrayal of East Pakistan rural life won her national fame in the late 40's, a reputation she has maintained.

SYED WALIULLAH [*This Life*]. Bengali author, novelist, short story writer, and a publicist, gained fame in Bengali literature in 1950 with the publication of his first collection. His characters are generally from rural East Pakistan, set against the craftsman's probe into the essential reality of Life and Nature.

JAMILA HASHMI [*Orange Mist*]. Urdu novelist, housewife, and critic, won fame at early age with a prize-winning

novel. This excerpt from a long short story is placed in the Majha, the heart of the Punjab, and the fountain of the Sikh culture, a culture which intermingled with the Muslim culture to produce the two most powerful and virile forces in the history of the vast Indian sub-continent.

OMAR ALI CHOWDHURY [*The Man Who Was Yesterday*] Writing in English, poet, journalist, short story writer, business executive, won fame at a young age with his collection of poems, and the powerful attack on Karachi's social misdoings.

SYED MAHBUBUR RAHMAN [*The New Estate*]. Bengali novelist and short story writer, belongs to the galaxy of young writers of East Pakistan who have shown daring and skill in their probes of contemporary urban life.

ASHFAQ AHMAD [*The Lost Night*]. Urdu novelist, essayist, radio and TV artist, won fame as a short story writer in the 50's. His penetrating study of the foibles of the lower middle class has the urgency of journalism and vigour of literature.

MAHBUB-UL ALAM [*Acquaintance With Satan*]. Bengali historian, novelist, and short story writer, won critical awards at home, and has given a life-time to the service of literature.

ENVER SAJJAD [*The Grass, The Wind, and The Cripple*). Urdu playwright, actor, short story writer, and doctor of medicine, is the most significant literary product of the 60's, and experiments with vast sensibilities of the political-emotional imbalances of the contemporary period. This selection is a surrealist description of what is happening in the Indian occupation of Kashmir.

MUMTAZ SHAH NAWAZ [*The Heart Divided*]. d. 1948. Writing in English, novelist, poet, politician and social worker, came from a family of Punjab aristocracy, and spent a life-time in the service of Pakistan movement. Her literary works won acclaim at home and abroad. This excerpt, taken from the novel of the same name is a monumental study of the

Muslim struggle towards the creation of Pakistan.

INTIZAR HUSSAIN [*The Last Man*]. Urdu short story writer, playwright, columnist, critic, is the leader of the young group of writers now maturing into its own and avidly experimenting with form and narration.

SYED SHAMSUL HAQ [*After The Defeat*]. is a young Bengali writer with promise, and his stories depicting urban life, catch the atmosphere of the City with all its vigour. He is at present engaged in writing for the films, and directing them.

MUMTAZ SHIRIN [*The Descent*]. Urdu short story writer, critic, educationist, and publisher, her study of middle class human tragedies have won her acclaim.

ALTAF GAUHAR [*The Last Azaan*] Writing in English and Urdu, poet, essayist, critic, publicist, civil servant. This is a true story, a story which came from the India-Pakistan war front, as Pakistan fought back valiantly and with courage a dastardly and immoral aggression.

SAFDAR MIR [*Light of a Million Flames*]. Writing in English and Urdu, critic, essayist, poet, playwright, actor, won fame in the 50's with his verse plays. He portrays aspects of Punjabi culture, and the great spiritual root of this virile language and race.

HAMID JALAL [*The Agony of an Ecstasy*]. Writing in English, journalist, translator, essayist, publicist, and civil servant, his agonising study of a great artist of Pakistan won instant fame, and helped promote the works of Manto in the English-speaking world.

SHAMSUDDIN ABUL KALAM [*There is Hope*] won fame at a young age as a Bengali short story writer, novelist, and fearless essayist. His contribution here is an essay full of doubt, but with faith in the future of East Pakistan literature.

THE TRANSLATORS

The editors express their gratitude to the translators, whose admirable and industrious translations from the original Urdu and Bengali is the great merit of this book.

RAZIA KHAN, Bengali author, novelist, and poet, won fame with her selections of poetry and translations of East Pakistan's prose writings.

SARWAR MURSHID, poet, essayist, publisher, critic, teaches English at Dacca University, and his translations of East Pakistan writings won him recognition at home and abroad.

ALI AHSAN [See Editors].

KABIR CHOWDHURY, poet, critic, essayist, teacher; his virile and powerful translations of East Pakistan writings are often considered an improvement on the original.

KHALID HASAN, critic, columnist, civil servant, his searching querries into contemporary situations have won him a wide readership. His deep study and insight of West Pakistan culture equipped him for the translation of Urdu writings.

RIAZ HASSAN, novelist, essayist, teacher of English at the Punjab University, he brings to his work the experience of long study of fiction in England, and a sympathetic appreciation of Urdu literature.

ZAHIDA KHANUM, essayist, teaches English to post-graduate students at a Lahore girls college. Her vast love for the Punjabi folk life, and the rhythm of Punjabi beat—all combined to make her rendering of the Punjab life a delightful rhapsody.

NASIR AHMAD FAROOKI [See Editors].

AHMED ALI [See Editors].

HAMID JALAL [See Authors].

FOREWORD

The emergence of Afro-Asia on the world horizon as an independent entity is a factor of considerable significance in the process of history. Colonialism and neo-colonialism are dying their natural deaths and the people of Afro-Asia are developing consciousness of their separate identity in world councils. They are becoming increasingly aware of intimations of their date with Destiny. In the wake of political resurgence, have followed the storms and stresses of a new life arising out of economic and social adjustments acquired by the new orientation of national policies. How have the creative artists in the countries constituting Afro-Asia reacted, on the intellectual plane, to the ferment around them ? Do they find themselves committed to the implications of the new order, or have the winds of change blown past them, without affecting their psychosis, in any essential respect? Is there a common strain of basic thinking visible beneath the surface of their productions—a principle of unity in diversity—or do they exhibit a parallelism in their approaches, with no potentiality for a meeting point ? These are some of the questions that might suggest themselves to the discerning observer of the Afro-Asian scene. An acquaintance with contemporary literature of these countries may perhaps provide material for formulating the relevant answers and may, in addition, lead to a mutual understanding of the special problems confronting each member of the complex called Afro-Asia. This publication is an earnest desire to create a forum for such understanding. We start with the presentation of a cross-section of Pakistani literature. Great art in any society is the exception rather than the rule. A century of intense cultural truths produces but a few works of art. It would be presumptuous of Pakistani creative writers to lay a claim to immortality. The editors record, nonetheless that in spite of the complexities inherent in a transitional state of development, the writers of Pakistan have produced significant art. All the

authors selected are Pakistans', all their writings deal with Pakistan, or with the streams that go into making Pakistan. The major writings have been done in Bengali and Urdu, the national languages of Pakistan ; and there is a selection from the writings in the original English, since this remains for the time being the vehicle of much literary activity amongst the middle-class and upper middle-class society. Paradoxically, the ousting of British imperialism did not mean the ousting of the English language, whose international status is fully recognised in Pakistan. It may be noted with interest that literature produced in English has happily sought its form and content in the indigenous spirit of Pakistan.

The variation in theme in a country as diverse and as colourful as Pakistan is but to be expected. The writer in Pakistan is essentially a middle-class phenomenon, for this was the only class which learnt to read and write, and give to its children a university education. The products of this class were the first to revolt against the social and economic imbalances of colonialism, and the mental blocks left as a legacy of the past. This was the class that formed the base, indeed the spearhead, of the movement of Pakistan. Some of these writers went into the villages, recorded the great inherent charm and vigour of a fertile plain, depicted the cruel game the elements play on a land that is sometimes parched with drought, and sometimes flooded with water or devastated by hurricanes. This is markedly reflected in the literature from East Pakistan, where the romantic sentimentalism of the general stream of culture is superimposed on the essential aftermath of colonialism and feudalism. So also in the works from the authors of the Punjab, where the fragrance of the mango groves, and the russet brown of threashed wheat dominate the rural environment, as the peasantry lives out its vastly complex problems.

Urban life, and the emotional overtones and undertones in the life of the bourgeoisie, have received more definite and adroit emphasis by writers from West Pakistan, and especially those writing in English.

The selections from Bengali and Urdu are exclusively devoted to short stories, while the selections from the original English include extracts from novels, creative reportage, and essays reflecting the variety of active effort existing in that

language.

In a selection of this nature there is always a lurking doubt with the readers, and the editors, that the choice has been arbitrary. The editors, therefore, invited a panel of distinguished writers, critics, and authors to suggest names of authors who merit selection. This selection represents, generally speaking, the consensus of the views of the panel. For reasons beyond the control of the editors not a few distinguished authors, and writings, could not be included. In some cases the copyrights were not available, in others the translations were not adequate, and in yet some others, the Book Club could not afford to buy the rights of works already sold at home and abroad to publishing houses.

The index of selected authors does not follow any special pattern. The names were picked at random, and then serially inserted. This is not the easiest way to categorise literature, but in a selection of this character the editors believe it to be the best, and the safest.

The selection reflects the creative art of Pakistan, not the propaganda for Pakistan. Creative art, at its finest, holds up the mirror to a nation's inner life. It is hoped that the intelligent reader will discover in it a sensitive record of the life and problems of a people in search of truth. The Afro-Asian Book Club present "Under the Green Canopy" as its first venture to the reader of Africa and Asia, and trust that the shortcomings incident to a pioneer effort of this kind will not fail to enlist the indulgent sympathy of discerning critics.

The Editors

THE RAINS

ALAUDDIN AL-AZAD

THE rains will come. The wind from the south, blowing in the spring night slightly touched with dew, will soon have the wetness of the sea in it. It will blow over parched, furrowed meadows and, raising a tremor in the leafless tree tops, will gather in dark clouds on the distant peaks. And then, tearing apart the entire sky in lightning streaks, the rains, amidst deafening thunder, will fall in multitudinous streams like the blessings of God. In place of the dried branches of the trees, tender young leaves will sprout and the whole field will be covered with layers of green. Gleaming in the jute fields under the mid-day sun one will perspire profusely but with no weariness. For the dreams of the new harvest will entwine themselves with every drop of one's blood like a powerful flood.

Things, however, were different this year. The month of *Phagun* passed and yet the northern sky did not get even slightly dark. *Chaitra*, too, was coming to an end. Faint rumblings were heard in the sky and the whole atmosphere grew stuffy but that was about all.

And then came *Baisakha*. Still the sun, scattering sparks of fire, continued to blaze with unabated intensity. The young jute plants that had come up from the bosom of the earth slowly shrunk and grew listless. There was an utter emptiness above.

And below, it seemed, a vast openness stretched from one corner of the earth right up to the horizon. Further below stretched the sun-burnt baked earth streaked with weird designs.

Standing at noon on the border of the field one would find his heart clutched by a strange sensation. The field was a witch stretching out her burnt, coppery tongue. She had devoured her own corn-child at her breast with a burning hunger. There was no doubt that next year the curse of God would descend.

But why ? There must be some serious cause behind it. The question came up for discussion after the Friday prayers. Standing near the pulpit, Maulana Mohiyuddin said : 'Dear brothers, I am only an humble servant of God. I don't know what to speak to you. You know everything. It is written in the Book that when the world will be full of sins, the curse of God will fall on man. And what do we see today ? On the one hand, sons do not obey their fathers, the women do not observe *purdah*, and the world is full of thieves, swindlers and scoundrels. On the other hand, the people neither say their prayers nor fast, nor go on pilgrimage. Brothers, let us all pray to Him today and weep before Him. He is the most compassionate and if He pleases He can bestow on us a particle of His infinite mercy.'

The resonant voice of the Maulana filled the interior of the mosque. Hajee Kalimullah stood up from the pious congregation. He had a tiny white beard on his chin and a white cotton cap on his head. Long and regular prayers had left their mark on the centre of his forehead. He cleared his throat and spoke, his voice quivering with emotion : 'We shall surely do what the Maulana Saheb has suggested. But, along with this, every one must remember that the evil-doer has got to be punished. Have you ever pondered over the question as to why this drought should be visited unto us ? To tell you frankly, some woman is surely big with an illegitimate child. She may be one of the women of the neighbouring villages. She may even be a resident of our own village for all we know. We must seek out the sinners or we cannot escape this curse. We must be very stern with them. The scoundrels should be horse-whipped.'

Hajee Kalimullah ran the fingers of his right hand through his beard and, trembling with anger, took his seat. Only one thought burnt in the cells of his brain, that of finding out the real culprit.

It was decided to hold congregational prayers for the

coming of the rains in the football ground under the blazing mid-day sun. But Maulana Mohiyuddin fell ill on the day before the one fixed for the special prayers.

The villagers requested Hajee Kalimullah to lead the prayers. He politely objected at first but later, at the request of all, he consented to do so.

After the prayers were said on that day, Hajee Kalimullah turned from the west and stood facing east, surveying the large congregation with complacency. It was good to see that the world had not yet become completely uninhabitable. Even now, once the call was given, you could get a thousand people to offer their prayer before the great God. He looked with satisfaction at the sight of the innumerable caps on the heads of the people in front of him. What if they were shabby and torn and dirty with oil ? The helpless people sat close together in the wide open field with hollow cheeks praying for a little mercy. Raising his two hands Hajee Kalimullah intoned in his deep voice: 'O Allah, cast Thy eyes on us, be kind to Thy servants. Thou art the Lord of the earth and of the sky, of the sun and the moon. At the sign of Thy finger the sea swells, the wind blows, the sea rushes forth. At Thy slightest wish this world can blossom with flowers and crops. O God, give us clouds, give us water, give us shade, give us peace !'

'*Allahumma Ameen* ! *Allahumma Ameen* !' the entire congregation wailed. Hajee Kalimullah's grey beard got drenched with tears from his eyes. Overwhelmed with sobs he finished his prayers with the words: '*Sobhanaka Rabbika Rabbil Izzate Ammayassefun Assalam Allal Mursalina Alhamdu Lillahe Rabbil Alamin* !'

The children, the young men and the old, all the people gathered in the field like this on three consecutive days. They prayed to God with one eye towards the sky and the other towards the dying, shrunken crops. Tiny boys and girls painted the only son of a mother in black, placed on his head a winnowing-fan with a frog and the twig of a *bishkantali* plant on it, and played at the game of the cloud and the rain. They cooked rice-pudding on the bank of the river and served it to beggars on banana leaves. They gazed at the sky hour after hour and developed a pain in their neck and yet the sky was as blue as ever. There was not even the trace of a small patch

of cloud anywhere.

Sitting on his prayer-mat after the evening prayer and counting the beads of his rosary, Hajee Kalimullah was lost in thought. One could detect signs of weariness and anxiety in his eyes. Well, there were good reasons for that. He had earned a few thousand rupees by blackmarketing yarn. With half of that money he had purchased a ware-house at a business port on the river Meghna and with the rest one and a half *dron* of land. If he failed to buy jute on his own and store it in his warehouse, its purchase would be pointless. It was no good getting a monthly rent of a mere rupees one hundred and fifty. But it looked as if he would not be able, after all, to use the warehouse for himself this year. On top of it he had cultivated all his land himself this year. That was stupid. If he had leased out the land he could get about rupees fifteen hundred in cash. At present he was simply tired to death in looking after the land and supervising the work of the hired men. He had already spent not a small amount on the purchase of seeds, preparation of land and other measures. A good deal more would have to be spent in the future but, from what the sky looked like, there was little possibility of a good crop this season.

It had not been wise to give up the yarn business. Last year he had gone on pilgrimage by aeroplane. He had planned that on his return he would not entangle himself so much in wordly affairs. He would leave the ware-house in the hands of his children and would personally look after the land only. But lack of funds spoiled all his plans. He told himself that, after all, business was business ; there was no question of honesty or dishonesty in it ; everything was all right as long as one had good intentions and spent something on charities.

The strong fragrance of the mango blossoms was coming through the window. The twittering of the *shaliks* from nearby bamboo clusters had perceptibly lessened. The beads of the rosary slipped through the fingers of Hajee Kalimullah and he found that his mind was being slowly engulfed in a stupor.

Zaigun came into the room to light the lamp and was startled to find him sitting there. She exclaimed, 'Why, sir, I thought you had gone to the mosque.'

Looking up at her, Hajee Saheb said, 'I am not feeling

very well. Besides,' he added, 'your lady would be back, I think, any moment now.' Hajee Saheb, unable personally to go, had sent in the morning his third son by the first wife to fetch her. As a matter of fact, Hajee Saheb was always averse to allowing his wives to stay at their fathers' places for a very long time. He had given his first wife only ten days and that too in the beginning when she was a new bride. The number of days had slightly increased in the case of the second wife. But now he was in his declining years. One could no longer afford to be as strict as before in everything. When his second wife died two years ago he had lost all interest in the world and its affairs. But who could predict God's mysterious ways? What was allotted would surely come to pass. Last year when he was preparing to go to *Haj*, only a month before the date of his departure, everybody insisted that he should marry again, if only for the sake of the stability of his prosperous and happy family.

But what about the bride ? He was going to be sixty and who would offer his daughter as a wife to him ?

'How you make me laugh,' Maju Pradhan had cried out, running his fingers through his beard. 'You just say the word and I will find the girl. And not any girl, I will find out such a woman that you will only stare at her speechless with wonder.'

Hajee Kalimullah's eyes had brightened with happiness. His heart had beat with a strange emotion. But outwardly he had remained rather sorrowful and indifferent. It would not be right to forget the memories of the former wives so soon. He had swallowed and said: 'Look, I have now grown pretty old and this is no time for merry-making. It would be enough if some one were there to attend to the household affairs and my few personal needs.'

'That I understand,' Maju Pradhan had argued. 'You can do with a damaged boat and you can do with a new one. But what do we want? Which one is pleasant to cross the river in ?' After all this the wife that was arranged in exchange for full seven *kanis* of land was none other than a granddaughter of Maju Pradhan. She was about twenty-one or twenty-two years old. Women in this country get old at twenty. From that point of view the match with Hajee Saheb was not an

unsuitable one.

Zaigun finished her work in the kitchen and came. With a meaningful solemnity she drew a stool and sat near the door. Hajee Saheb had not yet finished reciting the Quran. Stopping his murmuring for a while, he asked: 'Any news ?'

'Yes, there is,' replied Zaigun.

'What is it ?' Hajee Kalimullah's fingers came to a stop at the rosary. He looked at her eagerly. He had engaged Zaigun for collecting secret information whenever she was free from her work. And hence this eagerness on his part.

Zaigun said: 'I went to Batashi today. She was gathering mango leaves for her goat. As soon as she saw me she started talking of all sorts of things but I only gazed and gazed at her figure.' Casting a glance at the door she continued, 'Her abdomen looked swollen.'

Hajee Saheb asked solemnly : 'When did her husband die ?'

'Seven or eight months ago, I am sure,' Zaigun said after calculating, and added, 'but it looked as if she had conceived only four or five months ago.'

'Is that so ? Then there is a gap of quite some time.' Hajee Kalimullah's eyes twinkled with hope as if he was seeing the light of truth at last. He asked in a low voice, 'Did you see the man who lives in her room ?'

'Yes, I did. He is much better, though not yet fully recovered. I saw from the door that he was lying on his bed in that room.'

'Yes, yes,' the Hajee remarked impatiently.

'What if he were in bed ? Couldn't one indulge in those activities if one lay sick in bed ? What do you say ?'

'You speak the truth,' said Zaigun and added, 'besides, I never liked Batashi's ways. People used to say a lot of things about her even while Rajab Ali was living. Didn't everybody know of the affair when Chamu of Namapara opened the doors of the room ? The blame fell on Chamu only because Rajab Ali got wise about the incident. Can any one dare act like that without encouragement from the woman ?'

'If this be the truth then everything seems simple and clear. I believe Batashi has done it. Otherwise why should not the rains come ?' Hajee Saheb again began to count the

beads of his rosary. He said after a while, 'Still wait a little ; let me personally check the matter. Then something will surely have to be done.'

Hajee Kalimullah was lost in deep meditation after Zaigun left. The furrows on his forehead grew deeper. His fingers on the rosary moved quicker than ever. Batashi! Batashi! Batashi! None other than Batashi could do this. This was the trouble of being a young widow. For how could a woman, having once lived with a husband, forget that taste ? It was like opium. One could give up rice but not the intoxication of sex. Besides, she was in the fullness of her youth. Just one man or two were nothing to her. She could make them stumble and fall by a mere meaningful wink. And how clearly she has managed the whole show ! A cousin, only a day labourer, a poor victim to black fever with none to look after him. And so she simply has to take care of him. Well, no one was going to be fooled by such excuses any more. It was quite clear that the man was taken in because she wanted to share her bed with him at night.

But who could be punished for this ? If one were to follow the directions of the Book, she was to be buried in the earth up to her neck and then stoned to death. But could one do that sort of thing in this age? The law and the police were there. What then ? A beating with the shoes ! Social boycott ! Banishment from the village !

While Hajee Kalimullah was deeply engrossed in such thought, Khaled had arrived with his new step-mother near the waters of the dead river.

The full moon had appeared in the sky long before they had left. It now rose above the bamboo-thickets in shining splendour. Everything was quiet all around. No wind rustled the leaves of the trees.

The shallow river had only knee-deep water in it. Pushing aside the mud on both sides, a thin strip of path stretched and met the land on the shore. Over the clear sand of that thin strip, the stream of the fountain flowed smoothly. The tender paddy leaves of the Boro fields, coming up through the water, embraced each other with affection.

Zohra stooped and took off her shoes with her right hand. She held in her arms a young child. Noticing her inconveni-

ence, Khaled came up from behind and said: 'Please let me take Saju.'

They were almost of the same age. At first Khaled felt somewhat embarrassed in addressing her as 'Apani', the respectful 'you' reserved for addressing elders, but he had got over it by now.

Zohra looked at the face of the eldest son, bright in the moonlight. His beautiful eyes below the long drawn eyebrows seemed still more beautiful to her. Her heart trembled with an unutterable emotion like the thrilled river in the darkness of the wood. She asked dazedly: 'Won't you find it troublesome ?' Khaled smiled. He said: 'Oh no, no trouble at all.'

Saju's mother had died two years ago. Saju was only five then. Deprived of love and affection, he became a constantly whining, weeping boy. But he was different now. He had come to like his new mother so much that he refused to part with her even for a minute. When Zohra left for her parent's house on the first formal return trip after the wedding, he quietly got into her lap and went with her.

In taking his soundly sleeping younger brother from her arms in his own, Khaled felt, for ever so short a moment, the fingers of his left hand touch something warm and soft like the breast of a pigeon. His fingers trembled like the leaves of the *Champa* tree in a sudden breeze. Instantly, his whole body quivered like the passing of the lightning in a heavy cloud. For a second he saw the girl blush deeply. Her whole face seemed to be suffused with a flaming red colour. Khaled could not stand there any longer.

Like the vague remembrance of some deep memory of an earlier life, an unknown feeling of pain engulfed his heart. He turned his face away and stepped forward through the smoothly flowing waters.

But Zohra kept standing there. Gathering her clothes she looked up at the moon and then at the moving figure in front. Then suddenly she grew restless. Briskly stepping like a frightened deer through the stream of the fountain flowing smoothly over the silvery sand, she stopped again at the brink of the knee-deep water. She gathered the folds of her *sari* between her legs with her right hand and drew them up to her knees. Bending over the dark water shining in the moonlight

she saw her image breaking into minute particles. She saw that with each tiny wave the image of the moon was breaking up along with hers. She suddenly raised her face and called, 'Khaled !'

Khaled answered from some distance, 'Yes !'

'Are you going away leaving me behind ?' she asked as if in a dream. 'I can't walk. Look, how beautiful the water is !'

Khaled retraced his steps. He said, 'What's the matter with you ? Please walk on. It is getting late.'

'Yes, you are right. It is getting late,' she said. Zohra walked a few steps through the water and then suddenly stopped again. Looking at the shimmering waves she exclaimed, 'Look, how sweet the water is ! One could gladly die in such water as this.'

Khaled did not say a word. He bent his head and walked on in silence.

A bird was crying somewhere in the other bank: '*Bou Katha Kao*.' Crossing the river she dried her feet and put on her new pair of shoes. But a hollow feeling suddenly filled her heart. Like some dry empty directionless wind, a sense of utter desolation overwhelmed her. She thought of herself and started violently, and then her whole body went soft and limp.

Khaled was walking slowly. He heard from behind an anxious appeal, 'Please stop for a minute !'

'What is it now ?'

'I don't know. Why are tears springing to my eyes ?' Zohra moved up to Khaled in a daze and planting herself in front of his eyes widely opened her own. Khaled saw in the light of the moon tears trickling down from her swimming eyes like drops of pearl.

Khaled asked again, 'What is the matter ?'

'You don't know anything. You don't understand anything.' Wiping her eyes with the fold of her cloth, Zohra said in a rush, like one possessed, 'Give Saju back to me. There is no one here and I am afraid. Let us go on quickly, please.'

A slight wind had started blowing a short while before, the two stood there facing each other. Now when they moved on without a word, a small dark cloud floated slowly from the

southern sky. Hajee Kalimullah, walking in his courtyard with his wooden sandals on, looked up at the sky and grew anxious. So his guess was right.

'Zaigun,' he called out. 'Come and see. We thought rightly. The clouds are gathering in the sky.'

Zaigun stretched her neck from near the threshold of the door and said: 'Yet you want to verify further. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind. Batashi is a veritable slut.'

Hajee Kalimullah looked up at the floating clouds in the sky and again started walking up and down. He could not decide what judgment one could pass in this case.

Zohra arrived after half an hour. Even while talking with her, lying in his bed, Hajee Kalimullah found his mind straying. The night advanced and yet no sleep came to his eyes.

Making up his mind the next morning, he went to Batashi's house on the other side of the mango grove in the eastern portion of the village. Batashi was cooking rice gruel in her thatched cottage. She saw Hajee Saheb and came out in the courtyard with a wooden stool in her hand. She did not know how to welcome this respected person who hardly called on people like her.

She was trying to say something to Hajee Saheb but Hajee was paying no attention to it. He was watching minutely from the corner of his eyes her smooth, tender, slightly yellowish body.

And there in his house, after supervising the breakfast arrangements, Zohra sat gloomily on the corner of her bed in her room. After her marriage this spot drew her with a strange fascination and during her free moments she was mostly to be found here. What was this magic ? What mystery was there ? Zohra did not know herself. The house had probably changed in various ways but this room remained always the same. Only a few new things had been added over the years. The touch of the former wives was still fresh on many objects.

She seemed to hear their soft whispers when she sat alone quietly in the darkness of this room. And then it used to strike her that she had no right to enter this room, that in possessing all the things of this room she had acted like a thief.

'But how am I to blame ? I did not want this,' grand-

father said. 'Don't weep, sister. Have patience for a year or two. The old fellow is about to die and then we will get hold of his property first.' Zohra murmured to herself, 'The property be damned !'

Her heart burnt inside like the scalding sensation one feels when hot wind blows over a raw sore. She felt as if she was gradually choking. She once nearly cried out. The pupils of her two eyes burned with a wild emotion.

Her brain throbbed. Shaking her dishevelled hair wildly, Zohra stepped out. When she raised her eyes, her look fell on the *mehndi* plant near the well. The plant flourished in the tender wet earth, and there were thick young leaves on its branches.

She had made up her mind to cut down this plant many times but had not been able to do so as yet. Today her right hand itched. Quickly entering the kitchen, she came out with a sharp kitchen knife in her hand and began to cut off branch after branch with each stroke.

Zaigun came running. 'What are you doing, ma'am ? What is this ? It is an old tree and has many uses. The master will be very angry when he hears about it.'

'Oh, shut up. I know better than you who will be angry or not. I want to cut it down and I'll do it.'

'I only work here for my food,' Zaigun said. 'What is it to me ? I was speaking for your own good.'

'Strange,' Zohra looked up at her. 'Do you have to worry about my good ? Is there no one else in the world ?'

Zaigun dared not cross her master's favourite wife any more. With darkened face she went about her own chores.

Zohra could not say how the morning became noon, how the evening came and how the night fell and covered the face of the earth. Some one seemed to have cut out a part of her heart with a glittering, sharp knife. The tumultuous wave of every day life evoked no response there. Only a wild fire burned there like a piece of live coal hidden under ashes.

Hajee Kalimullah went to bed after saying his night prayer and said: 'You know, Batashi has sinned. Just as I thought.'

'How do you know?' asked Zohra. The Hajee said, 'You don't need much intelligence to find out these things. I

struck the string in the right place and it rang out. Well, now there is nothing to worry about. Once the punishment is meted out, the rains will certainly come.' He added after a short silence : 'I'll raise the issue next Friday after midnight, and we'll see what happens.'

Zohra lay quietly and looked outside. Why was the smell of the mango buds so intoxicating ? Why was the night so black, so dark ? It were better if the sun never rose again. She would then be lost for ever in a land where she would be all by herself without any companion.

Hajee Kalimullah felt a soft touch over his forehead and soon started to snore. But for that sound, Zohra felt that a dead man lay by her with a white piece of cloth covering him from his chest to his feet. Pushing aside his hairy hand, she lay in silence for a few minutes more. Then she rose from the bed quietly and carefully opening the bar stepped on the court-yard. She stood silently under the mango tree in the corner.

Just as Khaled was stealthily entering the house, Zohra swiftly moved and standing before him asked in a low, urgent voice. 'Where have you been all day? You like to go without food, do you ?'

Khaled did not even try to say a word. He stood there stockstill. Suddenly Zohra raised her right hand and slapped him hard on the cheek and cried out crazily: 'I can't bear this pain any more. Please go away from this house. Leave me alone, for God's sake !'

Covering her face with her *saree*, she almost ran to the verandah, entered her room and barred the door.

Khaled stood at the same spot and tears trickled down his cheeks. He found his throat choking. He had left the house in the morning before any one was up. He had gone to the river bank and wandered aimlessly over the borders of the paddy fields. Then he had crossed over to the port, on the other bank where his two elder brothers worked in a store but no where had he found peace. And at last drawn by some strange and unknown attraction, he had come back home.

After it struck twelve in the night on this Friday, every one assembled in the sitting room of Maulana Mohiyuddin. The whole village knew of the affair by this time, thanks to muted whispers. But not everybody had the right to sit in

judgment. Tonight only the chiefs and the pious souls of the village, the learned in religious scriptures, were present in the gathering. They shut the doors and windows of the room, made the accused sit in the centre and opened the discussion.

Hajee Kalimullah, after carefully going through the religious books and annotations for the last three days and nights, had come to a decision. With the permission of the Maulana he read out his judgment.

Batashi had been moaning softly for some time past. Now she burst into a loud wail: 'Oh, mother, was this what was ordained for me ! Why didn't you kill me at my birth, Oh mother !'

'Stop crying,' the Hajee shouted. 'You thought at that time it was great fun, didn't you ?'

Maulana Mohiyuddin looked very thoughtful. His serene face grew melancholy and grave. Slowly raising his face he asked in a quiet tone: 'Well, do you have anything to say ?'

'What shall I say, sir ? You won't believe a poor woman. We are not human beings but merely cats and dogs in your eyes. How can we have any prestige !' Batashi wiped her eyes and added, 'otherwise how could you cast such aspersions on my character !'

'But such aspersions do not fall from the sky !' Hajee Kalimullah thundered and asked, 'Why is no one else being accused ?'

'My ill fate is to blame for that. Otherwise, why did no one notice before that even while my husband lived I used to be sick frequently, that I could not live without eating tamarind and bits of burnt earth every day ?'

Batashi's cousin Rahimuddin sat there wrapped in a dirty quilt and groaned from time to time. When he was questioned he only stared vacantly speechless.

While the trial proceeded the sky outside was being invaded by swarms after swarms of dark clouds from the south. The moon was being screened every now and then. Light and shadow were playing hide and seek with the trees and houses and the river.

And then suddenly the wind stopped blowing and nature waited breathlessly for a long time. Deep rumblings were

heard occasionally, making the houses tremble and simultaneously flashed streaks of lightning. Everyone within the room grew anxious.

Exactly at that hour a human figure stood like a shadow under the mango tree at the back of Hajee Saheb's house. It walked on tiptoe, reached the window and looked into the dark room searchingly. Like a haunted building in the midst of an unknown forest, the entire house lay there with suspended breath.

The figure moved away from the window, started moving up, keeping close to the wall, crossed the kitchen and stopped at the door of the bedroom. With each lightning flash, he seemed to shiver in great fright.

Soon the wind started to blow. The clouds clashed with each other and roared. Everything seemed to break and tremble. Probably, the door of the room was only closed and not barred. A sudden gust of wind threw it wide open with a bang. The man with quick, frightened steps got on the verandah, looked to this side and that for a second and rushed into the room in desperation. There was a terrific sound above, below, on all sides. Sound and more sound. With each stormy gust of wind, the corrugated iron sheets of the roof groaned and twisted. The wooden side-walls creaked loudly.

The man came near the bed, hesitated, as if he did not know what to do next. The hair on his body stood on end, his heart beat wildly, the blood rose to his head and his eyes became blurred. Where was he ? Was this life or death ? Was this the anguish of giving up all or the savage joy of intense union ? He pricked up his ears and heard the soft jingling of bracelets, the sound of a deep serene breathing and the tender rustling of clothes. Oh no, not here ? He did not want this. He could not want this.

He was backing out step by step and suddenly he felt a pair of soft, smooth, naked arms drawing him towards her in deep assurance.

The clouds in the sky above had, by then, engaged in a mad scramble. The world shook with the roar of each thunder. The sharp strong stormy wind was destroying the trees in a mad fury. Someone seemed to be bent upon an

insane orgy of destruction and chaos. Churned out of the depths of heaven, earth and hell, a terribly sweet tune of the Great Upheaval appeared to arise and engulf everything.

There was only the protest of the newborn when the rains first came accompanied by sharp stabs of wind. They blew over the fields and the houses in windy gusts. But soon this changed. Like the prolonged tune of classical music, the showers fell heavier as the fury of the wind grew less. After that there was only a regular rhythmic patter.

No one was conscious of the passage of time. After a while the man came out of the open door of the room, stumbled across the courtyard in the streaming showers and vanished into a room in the northern corner. Zohra followed him out into the verandah and stood there with her dishevelled clothes. The rains fell on her body and drenched her.

After a while Hajee Kalimullah entered the house with an umbrella over his head. He was panting. Zohra saw him and cried out: 'Why are you so late ? I felt so frightened !'

'What could I do ! Well, it is now all over.' Placing the umbrella against the wall, the Hajee said: 'She is a hardened whore. We couldn't get a confession from her even up to the last. But I am no baby, that I shan't be able to see through the excuses of a woman like Batashi. Both were soundly beaten with shoes and tomorrow they are leaving the village for good. And look at the blessings of God ! The rains came immediately.'

'So they did. Strange, isn't it?' With these words Zohra stepped down on to the courtyard from the verandah in the heavy downpour. Her movements were mysterious. The Hajee protested anxiously, 'What are you doing ? Have you gone mad ? If you get drenched so late at night you'll catch cold !'

'Oh no, I never catch cold.' Zohra came near the verandah. Pushing from over her eyes a cluster of her hair with her right hand, she raised her excited face that looked like a blossoming flower and said with her sweet laughter-laden lips: 'Why, don't you know that it is good to get drenched in the first rains of the year ? What a wonderful crop this will give us !'

Translated from Bengali by KABIR CHOWDHURY

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

SAADAT HASAN MANTO

I swear by God! Recite the *Kalima*! There is but one God and Muhammad is His Messenger. You are Muslims, believe what I say. I'll speak nothing but the truth. Pakistan has nothing to do with this. I can lay down my life for Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, but I swear by God that Pakistan has nothing to do with this. Please don't rush matters. I know these are the days of riots and disturbances, and that you have little time to spare, but for God's sake hear me out. Let me tell you my story. I don't deny having killed Tukaram. As you say, I've ripped open his belly with my sharp knife... but I didn't do that because he was a Hindu. Now, you'll want to ask me why I killed him. Well then, I'll tell you the whole story.

I swear to tell you the truth and nothing but the truth! I'll recite the *Kalima*. There is but one God and Muhammad is His Messenger! I'd be an infidel if I had known I'd get into this mess. In the last Hindu-Muslim riots, I killed three Hindus, but believe me those killings were quite another matter; not in the least like this one. I'll tell you all about it and why I killed Tukaram.

Well, sahib, what do you think of women? I think the elders were right. May God save us from the wiles of women. If I escape the gallows, I swear I shall never again go anywhere near a woman. Woman...the moment I see one I fall for her. All of us have to die some day and render account to

Allah. I swear by Him, Inspector sahib, the honest truth is that when I saw Rukma, I fell for her at once.

Of course, anyone has the right to say to me: "My man, with your salary of thirty-five rupees a month, what have you to do with women ; why don't you make your rent collections and be on your way ?" But, sahib, that is just how the whole thing started. One day I went to flat number sixteen in my tenement to ask for the rent. I knocked on the door and out came Rukma Bai. I had seen her several times before, but that day the damned woman had smeared herself with oil all over her body, and wrapped a flimsy *dhoti* round herself. I don't know what happened to me. I wanted to take off her *dhoti* and start massaging her. That, sahib, was the beginning and soon I had lost my heart, my mind, my everything to her.

What a woman ! Her body was like stone. I bruised my hands massaging her...so hard did I knead her, but... I wonder who fathered her. All she said was: "Go on, a little harder."

Married ? Yes, sahib, she was not only married, but as Khan, the chowkidar, said, she even had a lover. Of course, since I am giving you the full story, the paramours will all figure in it.

Yes, sahib, from that day, I was madly in love. She knew how I felt, because sometimes she looked at me through the corner of her eye and smiled. But God is my witness. Whenever she smiled a cold tremor ran down my spine. At first I thought that that was the reaction...the standard reaction in the presence of the beloved, but later I found out...wait, I'll start from the beginning.

I have already told you that Rukma and I had made eyes at each other. Day and night I thought of nothing else but how to get her. That damned husband of hers was always in their one room flat, making wooden toys. I just never got a chance.

One day I saw her husband in the bazar...what was his name ! God bless you! Oh yes ! it was Girdhari. I saw him in the bazar selling his wooden toys. At once I made a bee-line for flat number sixteen ! With a thumping heart, I knocked on the door. It opened and there stood Rukma,

glaring at me. I swear by God, my nerve almost failed me. In fact it did. I was about to turn tail when she smiled and beckoned me in.

When I had entered, she closed the door and said: "Sit down." I sat down. She came up to me and said: "I know what you are after, but let me tell you that so long as Girdhari is alive, you won't get what you want."

I stood up. Seeing her so near me had set my blood boiling and I could hear it bubbling in my temples. The damned woman had again used oil on her body and was wearing that same flimsy *dhoti*! I gripped her by the arms, drew her into a firm embrace and said: "I don't know what you are saying." My word, what muscles she had...I can't describe to you, sahib, the sort of woman she was. I won't try. I'll go on with the story.

I became more passionate and crushed her against my chest. "Girdhari can go to hell," I said, "but you'll have to be mine."

Rukma pushed me away and said: "Mind, the oil will spoil your clothes." I said: "So what," and again clasped her to my breast. Believe me, sahib, if anyone had taken up a whip and lashed my back to shreds, I wouldn't have released her, but that damned woman started purring...and had soon coaxed me back to my seat. I sat there without saying a word. I could not guess what she had in mind...that *sala* Girdhari was out. What was she afraid of? After some time, I could no longer hold my tongue. "Rukma," I said, "we'll never get such a good opportunity again." Very lovingly, she stroked my hair, smiled and said: "We'll get an even better opportunity...but tell me, will you do what I ask you to do?" At that time, sahib, I was not myself, I was out of my mind... as if the very devil had taken possession of me. I burst out, with great bravado: "I'm ready to kill fifteen men for your sake." She smiled and said: "I can quite believe you." Again my spirit wavered, but I thought it was due to excess of passion.

I sat there for some time more, talked of love and things of that sort; had some of the curry cooked by her and left very tamely. I didn't get anywhere with her...you know what I mean...but, sahib, you can't really get away with that on the very first day. I thought: some other time.

Ten days went by. On the eleventh day, at two at night, it was about that time, when someone woke me up softly and gently. I sleep at the foot of the stairs. I rubbed my eyes and who do you think it was ? Rukma ! My heart again had that sinking feeling. I asked, almost in a whisper: "What's it ?" She replied: "Come with me." Barefooted, I followed her. We reached her room and entered it. The room was in pitch darkness. I didn't give the matter much thought and forthwith put my arms around her. She whispered into my ear: "Wait a little." She switched on the light and I started blinking my smarting eyes. Then I saw some one asleep on the matting on the floor, with a cloth covering the face. I made a sign, meaning: "Who's this ?" Rukma replied: "Sit down" and I sat down, like an owl. She stroked my hair very lovingly and said something that I couldn't believe...it scared me out of my wits. I broke out in a cold sweat, the blood seemed to have drained away from my body ; had I cut it not a drop of blood would have flowed out.. can you guess what Rukma had said to me ?

Recite the *Kalima*..There is but one God and Muhammad is His Messenger..I am telling you the absolute truth. I've never seen a woman like her. She smiled and casually said: "I've killed Girdhari." Believe me, sahib, she had, with her own hands, murdered a strong, well-built man..What a woman ! By God, sahib, whenever I think of that night, I still have goose-pimples running all over my body. She showed me the thing with which she had strangled Girdhari. It was a short length of home-made wire-rope, looped round a stick, which she had used as a screw to tighten the noose, so much that the poor devil's tongue was protruding from his mouth and his eyes popping out of their sockets. She said she had done it all in the twinkling of an eye.

She lifted the cloth and showed me Girdhari's face..my blood, no..even the marrow in my bones froze at the sight. But that woman ; she didn't turn a hair. I've never even heard of the like of her. She lay down, not far from the corpse and there I was beside her. I felt I had turned impotent for life, but, sahib, I had reckoned without her. She did something to me, something so very unexpected and unfamiliar that all at once the whole of my body came to life.

I'll never forget that night..what a night and what a woman. There was the the corpse, only a couple of yards away from us, but we were entwined together, quite unaware of its presence.

In the morning, Rukma and I cut Girdhari into three pieces. His tools were in the room, so that was easily managed. We made some noise, but people must have thought that Girdhari was at work, making toys. You'll want to know why I participated in such a grisly and sinful affair ; why I didn't report the matter to the police..The fact, sahib, is that in one night that damned woman had enslaved me for ever. If she had asked me I might even have murdered fifteen men for her sake. You remember I had once boasted to her about that ?

Now the problem was how to get rid of the body. After all Rukma was a woman and I could not expect her to do the job. I said to her: "My dear, don't you worry. For the time being, we'll put the pieces in a trunk. At night I'll carry it away". Strange are the ways of God ! That very day riots broke out and the Government had to impose a thirty-six hour curfew in the five or six localities that were affected. I said to myself: "Abdul Karim, whatever happens you must get rid of the body tonight." At two o'clock that night, I got up and brought down the trunk. God have mercy, it was heavy ! But I managed to carry it, the weight didn't bother me but I was afraid of running into a yellow turban. You know, sahib, that's how some people describe your constables. The curfew was on and I would have been arrested for contravening it. But, sahib, God chose to be with me that night and there was no one in the bazar I had to cross. Quite near the bazar, I saw a tiny little mosque. I opened the trunk and threw the three pieces inside..and I returned.

God is Great and strange are His ways. In the morning I heard that the mosque had been set on fire by the Hindus during the night. The newspapers said nothing about the three pieces of a dead body and I presumed Girdhari must have been burnt to ashes in the fire. Now, sahib, the field was clear for me. I said to Rukma that she should let it be known in the tenement that Girdhari had gone out of town on business. I would come to her room every night at about two and both of us would have a good time together. She held me off, saying: "No, Abdul, not so soon. We should not

meet for at least fifteen days." That seemed to be reasonable and I agreed to the suggestion.

Seventeen days went by. Several times I had nightmares featuring Girdhari, but I said: "You are dead Girdhari, what can you do..why should I be afraid of you ?"

On the eighteenth night I was sleeping at the foot of the stairs, as usual, when Rukma came at midnight or may be an hour later and took me up to her room.

She lay down stark naked on the matting and said: "Abdul, my body is aching, please rub me down." At once I picked up the bottle of oil and started massaging her. After hardly an hour I was out of breath. Drops of my sweat fell on her glistening body, but she did not say: "Stop, Abdul, you must be tired." At last, I had to say that myself. "Rukma, dear, I'm finished, tired..exhausted." She smiled. Oh ! my God, what a smile it was. I regained my breath and sat down on the matting. She got up and switched off the light and came and lay down with me. I was so tired that I was good for nothing. I put my arm on her breast and dozed off.

I don't know what the time was when I got up with a start. Something very hard was pressing into my throat. At once I thought of that wire-rope, but before I could do anything to save myself, Rukma had leapt on to my chest and had given a couple of ferocious twists to the noose. The bones in my throat started creaking. I tried to shout but the sound just would'nt come out and then I fainted.

It must have been about four in the morning when I started regaining consciousness. Very slowly my mind cleared. My throat and neck were stinging with pain. I lay like a log and silently and slowly started loosening the rope round my throat. Suddenly, I heard voices and I held my breath. The room was very dark. I strained my eyes but couldn't see a thing. The noises I heard seemed to come from two persons grappling with one another. Rukma was panting for breath and haltingly she said: "Tukaram, put on the light." Then I heard the frightened voice of Tukaram: "No, no; Rukma, no..." Rukma replied: "You are a big coward, how will you cut him into three pieces and carry him away in the morning.." My blood suddenly stopped circulating. Tukaram and Rukma went on arguing but I heard nothing for I passed out again.

I don't know when, but someone switched on the light and I sat up blinking my eyes. Tukaram let out a terrible shriek and fled from the room. Rukma closed the door and bolted it. I can't describe to you, sahib, how I felt or what my condition was. My eyes were open, I could see what was going on. I could hear everything but I didn't have the strength even to lift my little finger.

This Tukaram was no stranger to me. He often came to our tenement to sell mangoes. How Rukma had spread her tentacles to him, I don't know.

Rukma was glaring at me, as if she could not believe her eyes. She had killed me, but there I was sitting before her, still alive. She was about to swoop on me when there was a knock on the door and I heard several voices. At once, Rukma caught me by the arm and dragged me into the bathroom. After that she opened the door. It was only the neighbour, who asked: "Is everything alright, we heard someon shriek ?" Rukma replied: "You heard me. I sometimes walk in my sleep. That's what I did just now. I opened the door and walked out. I banged myself against the wall and shrieked in fright."

The neighbours went away and Rukma again shut the door and shot the bolt. My life was again in danger ; it was obvious she wouldn't let me live. The moment I realised this I felt my strength come surging back to enable me to resist her. I decided that I would tear Rukma to pieces. As I came out of the bathroom, I saw Rukma leaning out of the big window. I rushed forward, put my hands against her buttocks and pushed her out..all this happened in a flash. I heard a thud and opened the door and went down to my bed.

I remained there all night. My throat had been very badly injured..you can see the scars even now. I rubbed it with oil and thought about what had happened. I was sure no one would ever get to the bottom of it. She herself had told the neighbours that she often walked in her sleep. When her body was discovered on the other side of the building, where I had pushed her out, people would think she had again taken a walk in her sleep and stumbled out of the window. At last it was morning. I had wrapped a handkerchief round my throat so that the marks would not show. It was nine

o'clock. Soon it was noon, but there was no news of Rukma's body having been found. I had pushed her out into a narrow lane between two buildings. It could be entered only through two doors, to prevent passersby from committing nuisance there. Even then the lane was always stinking with refuse thrown out the windows of both the buildings.

Every morning the sweepress cleaned out the lane. Perhaps, the sweepress had not come on her round or she would have noticed the body the moment she opened the door. That would have led to an outcry and a commotion..the excitement would have spread. But nothing had happened. I wondered what the matter was. I wanted the people to know about Rukma's death as soon as possible.

It went on to two in the afternoon. I steeled myself and opened the door to the lane. There was no sign of the body or the refuse ! Oh my God, where was that body ? By the Holy Quran, if I now escape the gallows I won't be half as surprised as I was at the disappearance of Rukma's body. She had fallen from the third storey on to a lane paved with stones. She could not have lived after that fall. But, then, who had carried away her body ? It's beyond the realm of reason, but sahib, it is quite possible that the witch may still be alive. In the tenement the general opinion is that either she's been abducted by a Muslim or killed in the riots. If she's been killed, then so much the better..but if someone has abducted her and taken her to some place then we know what he's in for..may God protect him !

Now I'll come to the part about Tukaram. Exactly twenty days after this event, he met me and asked: "Tell me, where's Rukma ?" I said: "I know nothing about her." He said: "No, you know". I replied: "I swear by the Holy Quran, brother, I know nothing." He wasn't satisfied. He said: "You are lying..you have killed her. I'm going to lodge a report with the police that first you killed Girdhari and then Rukma."

He went away, but I was bathed in sweat. I didn't know what to do. I thought a great deal about the situation. There was only one way out ; that was to get rid of him. There was no other solution. So, sahib, I at once quietly sharpened my knife. Then I set out in search of Tukaram. As chance

would have it, I saw him that very evening at five o'clock near that urinal. He put his empty fruit basket outside and went in to ease himself. I followed him. He was unknotting his *dhoti* when I called out loudly: "Tukaram." He turned round to look at me. The knife was in my hand. In a flash I had plunged it into his stomach. With both his hands he tried to prevent his intestines from slithering out ; he folded up and fell down. What I should have done was to have run away, but what a fool I was. I bent down to feel his pulse, to see if he was dead or alive. I only knew that there was some such thing as a pulse. I wasn't sure whether it was on the side of the thumb or the other. It took me some time to find it. By that time a constable had entered the urinal, opening his trouser buttons, and I was caught...That, sahib, is my full story. Recite the *Kalima*...There is but one God and Muhammad is His Messenger. I have told you the truth, nothing but the truth.

Translated from the original Urdu by HAMID JALAL

OCEAN OF NIGHT

AHMED ALI

Night, like the heart of the lover, conceals within it the mystery of life. Shut between the common world of days, it hides the secrets of human passion. Hatred and jealousy, love and frustration are to it as the moods of the loved one are to the lover. Men dance, moved by the invisible strings behind the curtain, dance until they cannot say who are the puppets and who the spectators, enact the stories of their lives and laugh or cry as the plot unravels. Ecstasy and sadness, the mystic joy and material fact of living mingle with each other in its darkness until they become indistinguishable, one from the other. From corner to corner of the earth it hovers, peeping into the private lives of men, staging its puppet shows wherever it goes.

The stars wink with approbation from the sky ; the moon, enchanted, looks into the enraptured auditorium. But night, the captivating *saqi* brings out its glittering cups and, drunk on the breeze that makes them dream and forget, they care not for the intruders into their lives. Dancing they go through the courtyards of life, dancing they pass into the halls of death. But life and death, like tragedy and comedy, are two concepts which cease to have any meaning for those who look upon them as two phases of the same reality. If you feel not, you pass from one to the other as night passes into day, learning from each its revealing secrets.

But why let such thoughts cloud your mind ? Laugh,

for behind your joy shine the tears of sorrow. The tears of sorrow shine until the smile begins to glitter in their pearls. These pearls drop and are shattered to a million bits that cover up the earth, with a million bits that cover up the earth with a million smiles. Yet I am unhappy, for the friend has grieved me, and I am left companionless and alone. But the night comes and shares its secret gold with the grieving heart. It takes me for a walk into the dark alleys of Time, mixing the past with the present in the by-lanes of Lucknow.

In these by-lanes walk courtiers and lovers, courtesans and idle rich, in search of companions or a little fun. In them is enacted the comedy of life and the tragedy of human beings. Tortuous is Life itself and tortuous are these alleys! In the silence of the night they echo its silences. But if you listen intently, from the distance floats the sound of music, borne by the wind, of tinkling bells and stringed instruments. Song and the drum. But another sound, more heavy and less musical, drowns the music. It grows in volume. It is coming nearer. You can hear the foot-steps resounding on the flag-stones. It is a man's voice singing drunkenly. You can now distinguish the word :

"I wear neither knife nor dagger,
Nor do I wear a sword...."

There is another voice speaking loudly. What is it saying? But the first voice has started singing again :

"O veiled beauty, lower your eyes...."

"Lower your eyes, lower your eyes! Where have you got it from? Why can't you keep quiet?"

"O veiled beauty, lower your eyes...."

"Shut up, I tell you, Murad Ali, or I'll give you such a blow as you'll never forget...."

"O veiled...."

"Stop it!" the other shouted.

"Why can't you let me sing? I am not singing from your throat. I can sing or I can cry. What has that to do with you?"

"It has this to do with me that we cannot forget the errand we are going on."

"And if we forget?"

"And if we forget, you fool, we shall lose our jobs."

"Lose our jobs !" the other said mockingly. "Who will dismiss us ? The Nawab ? He will not. For you and I will have delivered his message to his sweetheart, and perhaps snatched a kiss or two for ourselves."

"A kiss or two indeed ! You will get a kick from her mother. That's what you will get, Murad Ali, unless you behave yourself."

"And how does one behave ?"

"By doing what one is told."

"And what am I told ?"

"To come quietly with me to Huma's house and tell her that Nawab Chhakkan is waiting for her."

"But what has that to do with my singing ? That's her own song, anyway."

"It may be her song or not. You have to behave yourself."

"Alright, have your way. I am coming."

The two passed through the by-lanes and came to a wider alley. The moon was rising. Its light gleamed in the waters of the Gomti and, rising from it glistened on the golden umbrella of the Chhattar Manzil spread out in ripples over the domes of the former palace, uncovered the book of the past. There was Wajid Ali Shah dancing in the hall of the palace, wearing the precious stones inherited from his dead forefathers. A glitter of gold and filigree came from his body, a tinkling from his anklet bells as he suddenly rung them in an ecstasy before he finished the dance ; and the hall resounded with a chorus of praise. It echoed through the palace walls down the halls of the Qaisar Bagh where his wives and concubines held their little courts, sitting all dressed up and bejewelled, waiting, each hoping that the King might visit her on this moonlit night. But the echoes died down as the book fell shut and the page was lost in the mass of pages that followed. The palace was silent, and the successors of Wajid Ali danced to the tune of a band in the same hall. But this dance was different. Here they danced in couples, man and woman. And the tune that came from the instruments was foreign to the air it floated on. There was no chorus of praise, but a clapping in the hope that the band would strike up again and the dance would continue. But no encore was played ; and the clapping died down and was lost in the whirr of a foreign tongue.

Namdar Hasan and Murad Ali were clanging the chain on the door of Huma's house and the sound echoed through the night. It echoed but produced no response.

"They are not dead, surely," Murad Ali remarked. "Why don't they answer ?"

"Don't be impatient ; they must be having their beauty sleep. Someone will come by and by."

"I know how to wake them up," Murad Ali said and raised his voice to sing : "I wear neither knife nor dagger...".

"Oh, don't sing that again," Namdar Hasan said sharply. "What's happened to you anyway ?"

"To be quite frank, I got drunk last night. I don't know who introduced this daughter of the grape to our Nawab Sahib that he forces everyone to taste her joys ; and he gives me more than my share. So, as I was saying, I got drunk, But why is no one answering from this graveyard ?" And he clanged the chain again. "When I reached home, my wife..."

Someone was heard unbolting the door from inside.

"Who is it at this hour of the night?" said a woman's voice.

The two passed through the by-lanes and came to a wider alley.

The moon was rising.

"Is that you, Shireen, the sweet one ? Why, we are your humble slaves, Murad Ali and Namdar Hasan, come to tell your mistress that Nawab Sahib is waiting for her."

"Couldn't you find a better time for your visit ? She was tired and has already gone to sleep."

"It's his fault," Namdar Hasan said, pointing to his companion. "He's discovered that he's a great singer, and won't stop."

"But what has my singing to do with it ?" Murad Ali protested. "Let us not argue about it. Is the mother, Azizan Jan, awake ?" he asked the maid.

"She has retired. But I will go and tell her that you are here. Come in. But you should have come earlier and saved me all this bother."

As they entered the vestibule Murad Ali, taking advantage of the dark, reached his hand to Shireen's cheek and his whisper was audible : "My dear, my sweet one."

"I will teach thee how to say 'My dear, my sweet one,'" she said angrily, and a cry escaped Murad Ali as she pinched his arm.

"Why don't you behave yourself ?" shouted Namdar Hasan. "O why did I bring you with me ?"

"Yes, why did you ?" said Murad Ali.

Crossing the moonlit courtyard, they reached the verandah. Shireen asked them to sit down.

After a while Azizan Jan appeared, wrapped in an expensive Kashmir shawl of bright green, its border heavy with gold lace. She was middle-aged. At first glance she still looked young. She certainly had charm ; and on her brown face her dark eyes shone like ebony. It was a genial and attractive face, but it showed no warmth of feeling, and if the face speaks for the heart, hers showed that she had lost this commodity in the market of life long since. Yet she had the bearing of a lady ; and as she entered Murad Ali and Namdar Hasan stood up.

"Please be seated," she asked. "I do hope our Nawab Sahib is well."

She had hardly finished when both the visitors began to assure her that he was well.

"What made you take the trouble of coming at this late hour ?" she enquired.

"Actually there was a grand..." Murad Ali started, but Namdar Hasan glared at him.

"You keep quiet ! I will deliver the message," he said, then addressed Azizan Jan : "Nawab Sahib has a few visitors ; that is why he could not come himself. He has sent us to enquire after your and Huma Jan's health. And as he has not seen her for a few days he asks if she could come to see him."

"Please convey to Nawab Sahib my gratitude and heartful thanks for his kind thoughts. I would have sent Huma with the greatest pleasure, as she is no child and is mistress of herself. But she was not well today and is already asleep. You know how she loves Nawab Sahib and can never refuse his summons. She has been fretting all these days that he has not come. She will be very sorry when she learns that he had sent for her and she was not informed. Do please tell him how sorry I am. But she will go tomorrow, although I would like him to come here. I have not seen him for days."

Namdar Hasan's dark, bony face looked grieved. Murad

Ali could conceal his smile only with difficulty. But they could only do as they were told. They ate *pan* which Azizan Jan offered them and departed.

Outside it was quiet. The alleys lay silent in their dirt and damp.

"That was a nice story about her being ill," Murad Ali winked and his bearded face was distorted with a grin.

"Do as you are told," Namdar Hasan said sourly.

"And what have we been told ?"

"That she is ill."

"But she is not. You know that well."

"So what ? Nawab Chhakkan will sleep in a cold bed."

"And you ?" Murad Ali asked mischievously.

"Shut up !"

"Alright ; if I can't talk, I can sing," and Murad Ali raised his voice and began to sing:

"O veiled beauty, lower your eyes,
Lower your eyes.
I wear neither knife nor dagger,
Nor do I wear a sword.
Your lashes cut like knives and daggers.
Your eyebrows like a sword.
O veiled beauty, lower your eyes. . . ."

Their footsteps resounded on the flagstones, and the alleys and by-lanes echoed back the sound. The stars winked knowingly and the secretive earth absorbed the message.

But the romantic moon was restless. It sent out a little beam which went dancing along, playing now on the dome of a mosque, now on the roof of a house, until it came to a window. It rested on the bars of the casement just a while to regain its balance, then hopped into the room. It sat for a moment on the dial of a clock, hovered about the chandelier and lighted up the many tongued candelabra. It whirled around touching every bright object to light. Then it found a place on the silvery pole of the bed in which lay the sweetheart it was seeking. She slept in her silken clothes and her breasts heaved with an even motion like a boat on the river. Her dark hair lay scattered on the white pillow, and the diamond stud on her nostril caught the glow of the moon beam and lit up the golden face of Huma. Her eyes were like two rose-buds waiting for the sun to touch

them with its warmth that they might behold the glory of the earth.

The miracle happened and the beauty moved, nestled in her bed and, gently lifting herself up, turned on her side. The grace with which an angel fish dives down from the surface of the water is clumsy compared with her gentle movement. Her eyes opened for a while, caught the glint of moonlight in her mirror which reflected the shadowy depth of the narcissi, then settling down in her bed, she gave herself up to youthful dreams.

Namdar Hasan and Murad Ali found Nawab Chhakkan still awake when they reached the house. The winter night was cold and he sat alone on the carpet, one elbow resting on a bolster cushion, smoking the *hookah* whose elastic tube lay in coils like a snake, even as the thought of his beloved enveloped his imagination. An orange shawl, which was wrapped round his shoulders, fell to the floor like water, exposing his woollen half coat with its lace border running from the neck to the navel. He was well on towards fifty, and a parted beard, well set and groomed, adorned his otherwise undecorative face ; but his eyes had a glow of sensitivity and appeal.

Although his name was Sajjad Ali Mirza, he was popularly called Nawab Chhakkan. He came of an old Taluqdar family who had helped the John Company during the "Mutiny" and had been allowed to retain their estate. But a succession of spend-thrifts had greatly reduced it, most of it having been mortgaged or sold. Now, only a little cash and property remained. The title of Nawab, which the family enjoyed, forced upon it the necessity of maintaining a train of retainers and servants who, instead of being a help, were a drain on the dwindling purse. They encouraged their master to spend more on quail and cock fights, drinks and dance and song. Nawab Chhakkan, a true descendant of his forefathers, had inherited these habits. When the sands are running low in the glass, they trickle faster, even as a dying fire gives a brighter glow.

When he saw the two retainers appear, without Huma, an expression of annoyance crossed his face.

"And where is Huma ?" he asked.

"She wasn't well," Namdar Hasan replied.

"No ; she was well alright, only..." Murad Ali intervened. But Namdar Hasan said , "She was not well and had re-

tired to bed."

"But you know that it was just a story about her being unwell," Murad Ali said again.

"Do as you are told," Namdar Hasan remarked in a dry, angry voice.

"What is the mystery, anyway ?" Nawab Chhakkan asked impatiently. "Murad Ali, tell me what happened."

"It happened like this," said Murad Ali. "We started for her house. It was cold and we had a long way to go. So I started singing to which Namdar Hasan objected."

"I objected, or you were drunk ?" Namdar Hasan corrected.

"To tell you frankly, *huzur*," Murad Ali confessed, "this daughter of the grape is strong."

"I am not interested in your getting drunk. I want to know why she did not come."

It was after some questioning that he got the story from them. As he had set his heart on seeing his mistress, her absence made him feel frustrated, and he looked sad.

"But there are other courtesans," said Namdar Hasan to please him. "There is no dearth of them," and he quoted from a poet :

"May Lucknow last beyond all harm,
It still is better than many a place;
For you can often here behold,
A lovely and enticing face."

"Bring out the cups and the bottle," Nawab Chhakkan ordered.

"Not only will you drink," said the Nawab resolutely, "but you will dance as well until Huma comes here."

And the drinking continued late into the hours of the night, until they lost consciousness of their particular worries and fell asleep under the influence of this intermediary between sleep and waking, life and death.

THE WOODEN SANDALS

MUNIER CHOWDHURY

After the *ishaa* prayers everyone had left in the darkness of night, and the last to leave was Faizu Bepari whose devotion was the greatest. He was the owner of the strong pair of wooden sandals that lay before the mosque, and he stepped out of them only after *ishaa*, giving earth a chance to contaminate his ritually cleansed feet for the first time in the day.

He bought rice dear and sold it cheaply and yet the pious and learned Faizu made a profit. To ordinary folk the mystery of it all was impenetrable. Even the leading men of the village did not dare to speculate on the subject. The consensus of opinion in the village was that he, who is God's favourite, must have unusual luck. If you kept your body and mind clean and tried to earn your bread in ways sanctioned by the Book, God could not but grant you prosperity. Faizu Bepari was the only man they knew who kept his body pure all day. He sat all day by his rice sacks with the scales in front of him. And yet none of his buyers could claim that his ritual cleanliness was impaired. If he ever had to go to the lavatory, he took care to perform fresh ablutions before coming to the shop to resume his seat.

His body was the colour of earth, tidy and bare except for his white *lungi* and cap. He would lift the scales with a sharp jerk and balance the heavy measures against the load of rice with one hand as the fascinated buyers stood agape and watched. His white beard would swell, the rammed muscles of his shoulders and back would rise, stiffen, and grow

still. Such amazing physical strength at fifty was possible only by God's special command. No wonder that some buyers would touch his feet in reverence while departing with their sacks of rice. They never dreamt of examining for themselves the correctness of the weight of their merchandise. Even if they found any discrepancy, they would probably disbelieve their own eyes, but to doubt Faizu Bepari—no, that was unthinkable !

There was a big banyan tree on the meadow. Its tender leaves were shining in the raw morning light. The white cold gluey ground was littered with broken bits of treacle jars of the last market day, dry banana leaves left by the shopkeepers, little bundles of hay wet with dew, and miscellaneous dirt. The sun had not risen fully yet. The doors of Doctor Mati's dispensary were still shut. Only Hafiz Bashirullah, the owner of the jewellery shop opposite, had raised the bamboo shutters of his door, and was reading the Quran in his musical manner sitting on wooden planks on the swept spot in his yard. The banyan doves were weary of feeding on ripe banyan fruits, felt warm in their tender wings and the yellow grey things flew away.

Faizu was walking over the wooden bridge with the measured steps of his wooden sandals. He stopped in the middle of it and asked in his familiar tone :

"How many this morning ?"

"Six so far."

Kala the boatman was working at his fish traps below the bridge. His *lungi* was wrapped round his head, and his strong naked body was under water up to the navel. A lobster, half a foot long, was caught in one of the traps and was splashing about. Kala saluted Faizu mentally, for pious men brought luck. Kala examined the other trap, put the *lungi* on, and got out of the water. There were eight lobsters in all, but what would he do with the fish alone ? What would he give his sick daughter to eat ? If roasted, the lobsters would make, with chilli, a meal for him ; but what about the sick girl ? One of the lobsters suddenly cut into Kala's flesh with the claws of one of its half-dead legs.

Kala had been awakened in the small hours of the morning by the cries of the hungry child, so he had kicked his wife and got out. As soon as he came out he knew that she could

have fed the child if her breasts had had milk, but what was she to do if they had none ? She could probably feed it on her flesh if only the child would eat it. She had been married only four years, but Kala's own heart shrank when he looked at her shrivelled bat-like breasts.

"Are all of them lobsters?" Doctor Mati came out of his dispensary and asked. Kala nodded his head timidly as always. He knew what the doctor would say, knew it by heart. Lobsters were parasites of water, had no blood in them. If you ate them too often your blood would go white and breed parasites. Unfortunately, Kala's fish traps only yielded lobsters at this time. What could he do ?

"Kala, where's the money you owe me for the quinine you took for your daughter the other day ?"

The doctor stopped, picked up four of the larger lobsters, examined them carefully with knit eyebrows and continued: "Aren't these tiny? Bring me four more tomorrow, that'll even it up." The doctor went in.

Kala somehow mustered the courage to ask :

"Doctor, will my daughter survive ?"

The doctor's face broke up in a grimace :

"Yes, why not ? If God saves her she will."

Kala kept staring at him.

"Don't stand there with your jaws apart, feed the child, feed her. It is food that makes man live, do you understand ? Your daughter will live too."

Kala's ears burned, his head reeled ; he slowly started moving.

The doctor continued angrily :

"Why won't she ? She will, but not simply on my quinine and water."

Kala pressed his hands against his ears, he wouldn't hear the rest ; he knew it but he wouldn't have it from the doctor's mouth. He had an impulse to throw the other four lobsters in the doctor's face. He decided not to take the fish home. He would feed his wife and his daughter today—not on white lobsters but on white rice and milk, on food that made man live and made the blood red.

All of a sudden Kala was terrified as his eyes went over Faizu's rice store. He saw written in large white letters on the black tin wall the words : "Cloth for the dead sold here."

He could not rely entirely on the learning he had acquired at the primary school way back in his childhood. In Faizu's rice store there was cloth for the dead, that is, cloth for shrouds, that is, the cloth that is needed for burying !

"Why are you staring so hard ? Want anything ?" asked Faizu, who had noticed Kala from within the store.

"No ! No !"

Kala managed to cry:

"She owes it to your blessings, indeed she..."

Kala did not finish his sentence ; he ran out of the market place. He wanted to escape from the presence of those who were healthy, wore clean clothes, and kept their body pure. He wanted to be saved from having to answer Faizu's inquiries about his daughter's health.

He must take rice home tonight. He found a solution to the problem in the house of the Munshis. They offered to pay him a rupee and a half for weeding a quarter acre of land ; no food, though. Kala accepted.

Morning passed into noon and the heat rose. Kala stood in the dirty water and bent like a cow, went on pulling out weed. The sun was baking the skin of his back, and water accidentally falling on his body, as he moved his hands, gave him a queer sensation. He felt as if he was going to have fever with a shivering fit.

He had been carrying an empty stomach for about two days. His eyes, which had dreamt of rice for two nights on end, were growing turbid. He could no more distinguish the tender green of the rice plants from the bronze green of grass, and was uprooting stubbles of paddy instead of grass. Kala stood erect with an effort and viewed the apparently limitless, unweeded part of the field. The green grasshoppers hopped about at the least stir in the water.

Suddenly he remembered that it was Friday, the day of Jumma prayer. He had never missed it. He would pray today too, but with more reason—wasn't he going to buy rice and milk with his own money ? But suddenly he stopped short on the road and started laughing hard. He realized his own mistake and was hardly able to contain his laughter. Since the day when the tax collector had taken away his boat and his entire savings of twentyfive rupees, he had been left with no means of buying an extra *lungi*. He had his sole *lungi* on for

a week now. How could he remain clean ? He was not an angel. He could not go to bed naked either, so he would wear the same *lungi* every morning after bath. His face went blue from his hysterical laughter, and then turned black as he suddenly saw Arfani coming toward him, running like mad and crying. She was followed by a few important villagers including Faizu. She evidently was in no state to notice that her garment had not fully covered her body. She was rushing toward him, her ear-splitting heart-stricken wails filling the horizon.

Nothing extraordinary had happened. Kala's daughter had quinine mixture for four days, had grown very restless this morning, and had died.

Kala was sitting gloomily on the verandah with his head between his palms and was staring at his toe which had fed a leech, now lying belly upward after having its fill of blood. He saw that the leech had left a little mark in which blood was still flowing and that the skin around it had become somewhat white and uneven owing to exposure in dirty water.

Arfani lay indoors, groaning now and then.

"I don't want to die. No, give me some rice! Oh!" Kala moved his foot, as if to see whether it moved and had the strength to kill.

Faizu had left. He and other villagers did everything. Faizu had supplied the shroud from his own shop. While leaving, however, he had said that it was a sin to leave the price of the shroud unpaid too long and that it made the soul of the departed suffer. So three rupees and a half should be paid on account of this early tomorrow. Arfani was groaning again :

"I don't want to die ! I don't want to die ! If I were to die the price of my shroud would remain unpaid too."

Kala's head and feet felt heavy ; he was hardly able to move them. Arfani's incoherent wails had robbed his nerves of sensation. He got up on his two feet with an effort and went up to the door, and then started walking through the bamboos somehow picking his way in the darkness. His eyes were in the power of a strangely relaxing, overpowering sleep.

When he was awakened by rain blowing into his face, it was pitch dark. He lay with his head against the base of the withered palm tree on the bank of the canal. Gnats were singing. He remembered everything, and felt a bursting pain

in his hands and feet.

As he came near the mosque, he suddenly sat down in front of its wooden steps. After *ishaa* everyone had left. On the steps lay a pair of wooden sandals, strong and large. The imprint of Faizu's powerful feet was apparent on the smooth wood in the form of a dark impression clearly showing the mould of his toes. Kala started counting the holes and as he did so his eyes burnt. He muttered to himself: "I don't want to die! No!".

In the darkness of the dead silent night, Kala came to Faizu's rice store and stood close behind it. He silently pressed the tin wall with his finger to see how strong it was.

He suddenly withdrew his hand. He realized that there were people inside. Kala pressed his ear close to the wall and listened. The odour of ripe paddy assailed his senses and made them numb. From within came the sound of fast, muffled breathing.

"Mind, what you are doing! Come over here, don't lie on that stuff for shrouds. Turn this way."

A woman laughed aloud with derisive abandon.

"O dear, the cloth for shrouds...he-he-he-he. But you have your rice sacks over there. With the rice sacks behind me, I'll not feel scared...he-he-he-he !"

The following morning, when the banyan doves took to their wings and the sun grew warm, and Faizu, serene and fresh after a bath, took his seat at the shop, Kala came slowly and stood under the porch. He took out a ten rupee note from the fold of his clothes and spread it before Faizu the tradesman. Faizu lovingly ran his fingers on the all too familiar note and asked :

"I guess, you want to pay for the shroud, don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir.".

"Anything else ? Some rice ?"

"No. For the rest of the money I'll have a shroud," Faizu said.

"A shroud ! For whom ?"

"For Arfani."

Faizu started up only momentarily. He immediately set his scissors to the white cloth and neatly cut out the correct length for a female dead.

Translated from the original Bengali by RAZIA KHAN

LIFE AND LAMENTATION

BILQEES JEHAN

There is neither space nor eternity. Yet human beings come in endless streams of caravans travelling from Nowhere. The heart and the eye contain the unending vastness of the skies and the illimitable depth of worlds that lie beyond the reach of man. In search of the nectar of love, they march with all firmness and resolve. At each step Hope is crushed by cramping failure, and the heart's glass is shattered to little particles. As the last tear-drops fall from the honey-filled eyes, they return hopeless and tired, helpless in defeat, to Nowhere whence they had come. What compelling desire had brought them to the world ? What inexorable destiny takes them away ?

I too am a traveller with these moving caravans. Before the start of the journey, I remember someone saying to me :

"Wake up, and behold the glory of Creation."

The voice was full of appeal, and its sweetness whispered the magic into my ears and, penetrating the veins and arteries, communicated the joys of the morning of love to the heart. I felt as if in a far away temple the goddess of Love, Radha, was offering flowers to the well-beloved Krishna, and the music of her anklet bells filled the air and reached me across the luxuriant valleys of Imagination, over the impassable mountains of thought. With eyes still shut I drank the joys of beatitude

"It's time to get up," said the voice again. "The sun is already high."

Resentfully I turned on my side. I did not wish to lose the enchantment of that dream. Then I heard another voice intervene :

"Why can't you let her sleep ? What harm is there anyway ?"

She would have said more perhaps ; but the hour bell tolled just then. The Caravan was leaving, it seemed.

"Get up. We are ready to depart," the first voice said again.

"It's all an illusion, an empty dream." The voice was weary and tired. I felt the speaker was sitting in a cellar of some old and hoary ruin.

"That's a lie," the first voice said in reply, "and you know that."

"It's you who tells lies.... you are much too vain of your looks and voice. It is with them that you entice others away and prove their undoing."

"You have no right to meddle in my affairs. Better go away, or...."

In their mutual bitterness that enchantment the music had woven around me disappeared. Anxiously, I opened my eyes.

Life, bursting with youth, full of serenity and charm, stood smiling before me, and in that smile each thing seemed eternal and everlasting. Wherever the eye fell, verdant meadows stretched far and wide, and paths full of light meandered through them like the Milky Way from the beginning to the end of earth and sky, where dreams crossed and desires laughed and cajoled with glory and grace. And the flowers beckoned, full of aroma ; the petals spread out their net to entrap the passerby. Half-opened buds carried unknown secrets within their bosoms which their lips were trembling to divulge.

What were the mysteries they wanted to unravel and tell me ? I had no wish to tarry and listen to their tales. At the moment I was myself the secret and the mystery ; and I stepped on to a different path.

Cups of many-coloured flowers were filled with silver and gold. Each atom of the path scintillated with a brilliance more gorgeous than of diamonds and pearls. The whole wide world was a house of precious stones, and untold treasures lay scattered at my feet. But I had no time to stop and collect their

wealth. I was filled with greater riches, and all around me was the radiance of lightning that lies hidden behind the clouds. I was struck with their wonder ; and beauty over-powered my soul.

I got up in all happiness and dressed like a bud that beautifies itself with fresh drops of dew in the hope and desire of becoming a full-blown rose.

Life looked at me askance again. In the coquettishness of her eyes was such inebriety that it communicated itself to my being. Then like an entrancing *saqi*, walking with graceful mien, Life lifted the cup of days and years from the shelf and put the ecstatic glass, brim-filled with joy, to my lips. It was sweeter than honey and every drop a revelation. With pride, I raised my head and cast a look around. Spring had suddenly arrived. The flowers tingled with ecstasy, and the *bulbuls* sang hosannas to love. The breeze struck a vernal air, and trees and branches embraced and danced with joy. Loving insects kissed the flowers and hummed the eternal message into their ears ; and colour-filled butterflies skipped with ease like Egyptain dancers of old. As I walked hand in hand with Life, they whispered : Lovely, lovely. At every step I felt that from the workshop of Happiness, messages of welcome were pouring in on me. And I walked thus, my bare head lifted with pride of love, and each reality was full of more enchantment than fancy or dream.

Drunk on the wine of bliss, I cannot recall by what paths I passed. Even the enemies of wisdom and sense cannot recount that now. Freed of the cares of life's ills, unconcerned with the problems of living, the tragedy of night and day, I had come far from my resting place, and went past the temple where Radha had already finished her offerings and stood with a garland of marigolds in her hand. Krishna was taking out annointing powder from a silver cup and putting it in the parting of Radha's hair.

With the sudden rapture of love, Radha burst forth into a song and put the garland round his neck. Smiling, Krishna drew her to his side and put the magic flute to his lips. And they cast a look at me deep with tenderness ; and the music of Life transcended the earth and was drowned in the ocean of Love. And the wide, wide world, the vast blue sky, the earth, the sun and the whirling stars were all existent on the rise and

the fall of the music of that flute.

There was someone, nonetheless, who was jealous of my happiness and leisure of life, who drew the invisible ropes of Time, and parted the embracing earth and sky. Who was it, after all, who had made the whirling of days absolute master of the functions of life, and imprisoned the fact of living in the continuity of sunset and dawn and flung it at the mercy of accident and chance ? There was neither blame here before, nor censure, nor even responsibility.

When Death knocked, my life became cold and listless and left my side. The song that I was singing in her praise remained unfinished on my lips. As she went to open the door I said with much humility :

"Please stay with me, if only another minute...."

She did not pay any heed to my prayer, and passed by me with such indifference as though we had never met before. I ran after her and barred the way. The thought of losing her filled me with dread. Like Doomsday was that moment ; and I beseeched her to tarry in the name of all the past, all the hours spent together in happiness and love. I recalled her old promises and loving words ; but nothing had effect on her, and she stood against the pillar like changed weather. I was melting before her like a candle with tears. She felt not any kindness nor pity, and snatched away the apron of her dress from my hand. I had somehow still faith in her ; and in the certainty of my own belief I begged :

"What wrong have I done ? Your indifference is full of distress."

In her inebrieted eyes, which had once held me ensnared, appeared the inanity of a self-seeking idol. She was all too unconcerned, oblivious both of friendship and me. Little did I know that Iwould have to bear this bitterness ; for she turned a deaf ear to my entreaties, and every now and then looked far away as if for some unwelcome guest. Availing of this moment between parting and loss, I recounted the past hopes and fears, thinking that she might thus abandon the thought of departing.

"Do you remember how we had walked hand in hand through the ups and downs of life as wave moves with wave ? Right from the temples of Ajanta to the Pyramids of Egypt our footprints mark the way. Together we had drawn a ring of protection along the Great Wall of China and the forts and

castles of Nineveh and Babylon. Standing before the immaculate domes and minarets of the Taj we had sworn undying friendship and love...."

Memories crowded in upon me all at once, and the past, emerging from the fathomless depths of Time, spread out its chequer-board once again. But there was no time to dwell on all the scenes and memories. All I added was : "Human beings are infallible, and I may have hurt you unconsciously without intent. Please forgive me, forgive my shortcomings and mistakes. The day is not far when we shall face Destiny to the face, mount up to Mars and the Moon where sorrows will be banished and fears will not beset us any more."

She listened to all this yet unremembered it all at once, saying only : "Who has ever prevailed upon me ? I am not a prisoner in your hands."

Then quickly opening the door she escaped. What I had feared all my life came to pass at last. Parting is sad, whenever it comes, whoever departs. With her gone, separation came with all her mourning troupe.

I felt senseless and unaware of body and being. The sky came down and the sun stood low. Flames leapt from the stars and flying sparks fell all around. Their heat shot through my bones and my flesh like red-hot knives. My tongue was dry, the throat parched, and the heart knocked against the ribs to burst away out of the chest. Clouds of smoke mounted from the earth to the sky, and the noise of torrents falling from mountain peaks filled my ears. With pain my lips were closed. The palms of my hands were shut, and thebreath, withdrawing from the lungs, was drawn into the eyes. Frightened I called out for help ; but my fellow-travellers had gone, it seemed, and none came to my aid.

In the silence that ensued, I saw her fair legs walking right in front of me on the road, her lily-white dress waving in the breeze. The moment my eyes fell on her, I began to shout :

"Catch her, catch that faithless slut, or she will deprive someone else of all wealth."

No one listened to what I said. They all stood near me, sad and woe-begone, my uncle, my brother, and my aunt. I held my uncle's hand and said :

"There, there, look."

But he merely replied :

"Don't lose heart. You will get well soon."

That was not what I meant at all. I let go his hand, and cast a look around. They were speechless. I could still see her disappearing shadow, and called out again :

"Don't let her go. She deserves to be walled in alive. Let no one be deceived by her looks or enticing ways."

Yet no one even stirred. Could they not hear me ? Was I speaking Latin and Greek ? I hated their indifference and unconcern, and I loathed them one and all. I had done so much for them all my life. Now when I was in despair, not one even moved a little finger for me. I wanted them to get out of my sight, for none stood by me in the hour of my need.

Just then I saw my father coming from the adjoining room,and hopefully stretched my hand towards him, for he had always done my bidding.

"Dear father, bring her back ; bring her back, please."

"I will, I will," he whispered, and lovingly wiped off the perspiration from my brow, and held my hand in his own strong hand. I was surprised at him, for he was crying like a child. Where had his courage gone, and his strength ? Had he not recovered my gold necklace from that thief of a Kallu, the maid's son, with one blow of his fist ? But now, when my most cherished treasure was going,he had nothing else to show but tears. With weariness I let go his hand.

The sorrow of parting had put me in defeat. The pride of my brow lay low. My hands and feet were ice, and a cold perspiration ran down my cheeks. I was tired and listless like a traveller who had wandered for ages and aeons. My ears buzzed. The sky receded. Time stood still. The revolutions of the earth found rest, and the moon and the stars were motionless. Silence lay over the universe, deep and fathomless as after a raging storm. The vast, uncontainable world seemed a toy, and the people who walked and chatted mere replicas of objects they made for the Festival of Lights. It seemed the potter, having dressed up his stall with them, had himself walked away. Tall and stalwart trees looked lifeless like paper flowers. Unclimbable mountains seemed made of clay ; the turbulent oceans mere dabs of ink as though a careless child had upturned the bottle.

I looked at the faces around me with wonder and surprise. They were bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, yet they

were not mine. Their eyes were filled with tears ; and I pitied them for their foolishness. I turned my gaze away and looked outside. Alas, the control of Autumn was not in Spring's hands. Spring had gone. Everything was a prisoner of Autumn. Trees stood head bent, leaves scattered ; and the hearts of buds were cut open, and their hidden secrets and mysteries were flying through unknown depths of Space. But I had no leisure to go and ask them, for I had become myself a revelation at that moment. My own secret had been unravelled and whispered to all and sundry by the sighing breeze.

I cast a glance at the temple. Radha had waited, waited for Krishna, and gone. The tray full of offerings was placed on the platform ; the marigolds had faded ; and the milk she had brought in the pewter cup to wash the well-beloved's feet was being licked up by a jet black cat. As I passed close by the temple, I saw the cup of annointing powder upturned and the colour, meant for Krishna's brow, spilt over the ground. Under the *peepal* tree stood Krishna himself.

"Why aren't you playing on your flute Krishna Murari ?" I asked. "Where is Radha ?"

But he looked full of dolour and replied :

"Radha has taken my flute away."

"But why ?"

He said not a word and walked away, walking silently and morose towards the Jamuna's banks.

She, who was being within my being, whom I had kept concealed as melody in the music, did not care for love in the least, and had left me in anguish. Lost was the flute, the melody ended. The waves that once had imparted courage to Beauty and to Love, beat against the shore and broke up into particles of foam. Life, love and sadness, music and beauty, which had once assured me with one voice she was mine, were now beating their breasts with the trees. When she was part of me and mine, sorrows were in banishment. But gone was the Spring. Yet though she had gone, gone so far away that her coming and departure were no more than a dream, why thdid her thought disturb my grief with defeat ? Yet, and yet, the fruitless search, the vain desire for life still bides in the secret depths of the heart, though the eyes have become dim and lightless with waiting.

Aunt had finished offering her afternoon prayers, and sat

on the prayer-cloth, the apron of her head-dress spread over arms like a begging cloth in appeal for mercy and grace. Others were busy as usual in daily chores ; but they went about their tasks like automatons, for the control of their movement, speech and laughter seemed to be in my hands alone. But Chaman, the cook, was talking to the maid as she cut slices of onion :

"My heart cries when I think of the little children. May God have pity on them."

Uncle was outside in the men's part of the house, yet oddly enough, he was not playing his usual game of chess. I turned towards the cook and asked : "If someone deprives a person of wealth and happiness, what punishment does she deserve ?"

She did not grasp the meaning of my question, for who has ever questioned those who perpetrate destruction and ruin ? They come in the garb of Spring, but leave behind the dreariness of Autumn. Remembering the days gone past, I was restless and racked like a fish that lies near the water on the shore but is powerless to jump back and swim. I was as close to Life as the twilight which paints the sky a passionate red when day and night meet.

But when the light fades, darkness andsolitude become intense, and hearts no longer remain innocent of sadness and pain. Yet Hope is a wondrous thing, and I turned my face towards the door and lay expectant of the miracle. I knew that it was useless,but there was still oil in the lamp ; there still was a chance though how futile and vain! With waiting my eyes began to smart; circles formed and danced before my vision, contracted to blue points then expanded to purple and vermillion.

The *muazzin* was calling the faithful to evening prayer. The sun had picked up the annointing powder spilled from Radha's cup and was filling the parting of Evening's hair with red dust. Night, wearing a garland of stars, was advancing towards my bed. Her strings were thrumming a tune, and I turned towards the music. I could hear the gentle sound of Life's steps in the melody. But then aunt's voice came into my ears saying to mother : "Where has this ugly black cat come from ? Will someone drive her away ? I feel frightened."

"Where ?" my mother asked.

"There, under the patient's bed. May she die, the black

face ! Drive her out, *Bua* Chaman."

And *Bua* Chaman emerged from the kitchen, a stick in her hand.

"Let her be," mother said. "Who knows what it is in the cat's guise ?" "Just look at her face. How frightening !" *Bua* Chaman remarked. "She miaows and glares as if ready to pounce on a prey."

In the meantime someone else remarked sitting down on the side of my bed : "How do you feel ?"

I turned to look. The new-comer had big black eyes, and it seemed the dark nights of Winter Rains had concentrated in them.

"Who are you ?" I enquired.

"I am the secret of your long-lost life."

I scrutinised her from head to foot. Did those cold black eyes really hold my destiny ? She had read my hidden thoughts, it seemed, for she settled down on my bed.

"My life's secret ?" I asked all amazed.

"Yes," she replied.

"You are mistaken," said I with assurance. "I am myself the secret of my life."

"Well, if you say so, you may be right. Yet you have been searching for it all your life."

She looked at me with intensity. There was in her dark eyes, the hypnotic power of the cobra which freezes the birds with dread.

"But how do you know ?" I said with seeming indifference.

She laughed a satisfied laugh and said : "I am a connoisseur of colour. Not for nothing are those eyes wan. Take this mirror and look. What is the meaning of paleness creeping into the cheeks ? You need not say it. The eyes speak for themselves."

Slyly she smiled. To ward off her attack I said gently : "Yes. She was annoyed with me for nothing and has gone." "Then why delay ? Come with me!" And she fixed me with a stare and did not move an eye-lid.

"I have no faith left in anyone," I whispered. "Even if she comes wearing holy robes, I will not believe a word of what she says."

She remained silent. Perhaps she had become suspicious

after my remark.

So, I myself added : "Leave this talk alone. You have not told me how you are related to her." "My name is Death," she said. "I am her younger sister. Did you not know ?" "No," I replied. "She never told me she had a sister younger than her."

She was visibly annoyed and said with bitterness :

"Of course, why should she have told you about me ? Now that I think of it, she avoids even my shadow. But why ? I ask you. You be the judge. What have I done to her that she should be hostile ? As for me, I love her dearly, and follow her wherever she goes. When I heard she was with you, I came looking for her, only to find her gone."

I was gazing at her face whose expression changed with each new emotion.

She remained silent for a while, then spoke at last : "She has deprived me of all good things. Even a rival would not do what my own sister has done to me."

"I don't know. You may be right. But she does not look so heartless, nor has anyone else spoken ill of her."

"That is why I don't complain. No one will believe me. In fact, they are all on her side. She enamours them by her looks. There is no point in opposing a loved minion." She was getting worked up, and continued : "She has all virtues. Indeed ! I know her ways, the flirt ! But looks do not last. She prides herself on beauty, and goes about winning over hearts. I dislike her ways. Her realm stretches over empires of gold, but she has never even given me a piece of tinsel. Just look at my clothes. I dress in the coarsest home-spun which even domestics and paupers shun to wear. You need not tell me how virtuous and wonderful she is. All she does is to put on airs. But then, it's all one's luck. Yet she has no right to run me down before her lovers as she does. However, I have no wish to speak ill of her. I have no concern with the tavern or temple, nor do I care for throne or sway. Contented, I sleep on a bed of sand."

"Chaman, O Chaman," shouted my aunt. "Why are you just looking ? Drive her away with a stick. That good-as-dead cat has found her way under the bed again ! Her miaows are terrifying."

"Why are you so jittery ?" I asked. "There is no sign

of a cat. You are shouting for nothing. It's only her sister who is sitting with me." As the cook advanced with the stick, I added : "What has happened to you all ? Can't you distinguish between a woman and a cat ?"

Getting up, Death said to me :

"Did I not tell you so ? You can see for yourself. No one accepts me for a moment. It's all her doing... I shall see to it that she becomes dust at last ! Anyway, I have no time. Come, if you are coming. I have so many things to do."

Wisdom parted the curtain of sense and said :

"Don't be silly. If you go with her, you'll only get lost. You grieve in vain for what is gone."

I heard mother say to aunt :

"Sister, quick, look, what's happening to Bilqees !"

Aunt stood up hurriedly and came to my side.

"The time for treatment is past. Take courage. Bring rose-water and honey."

But instead of moving, mother started to beat her breast and cry : "O my child, my child. What has happened to thee !"

"Be brave, and in peace let her depart."

O the foolish people ! What calamity had befallen that they should mourn ? I was displeased with them all. They did not realise that I was just going to look for her and would soon return. After all, one gets attached to those who are so near. When a man's brass ring is lost,he looks for it everywhere ; and she was after all, my life-long companion. How could I not go in search of her ? With difficulty I rose from my bed. Grief had made me lifeless in no time. My eyes were being pulled inwards and my throat was parched and dry.

"Please give me water," I asked my mother.

"May God give you health. Here, my darling," she said and, muttering a prayer, put some water in my mouthdrop by drop. But the fire of separation that burnt could not be quenched so easily, and in desperation I closed my lips. The neighbour's daughter whispered to the cook : "This is the last effort before the end."

"What is the hurry, after all ? Let me just wake up my daughter and tell her not to worry if I am late. You do not know that even when I go to the bathroom she stands leaning against the door and waits for me."

"If you remain involved in such petty things time will not wait."

. "I had forgotten to take out her clothes. She may get late for school in the morning."

"Leave it alone," she said holding me with both the hands. "Things will go on as usual even when you are not there. You may well rue the day if...."

I was losing my patience at her coldness, and I wondered of what substance she was made not to care even for children, and I asked : "How many children do you have ?"

She was taken aback by this question, but replied : "Much would you care. I am not so fortunate as you."

The annoyance I was feeling subsided with pity. The poor thing was childless. She could never know what a mother's love meant or the needs of children. She seemed lost, and I said : "You come with me as I do the few necessary things."

"Get up," she commanded. "Do not waste more time, or you will never find any trace of her."

Gently I got up from the bed and began to walk. I had not yet gone past the last pillar of the verandah when I saw them beating their breasts. The cries of lamentation followed me as I stepped into the courtyard. But I was not aware of their feelings and their pain. The love I bore them was for Life's sake, and I did not mind their wailing and tears. I had already reached the extreme end of the courtyard. *Bua* Chaman was praying and entreating God for His mercy and grace. What ominous words they were ! When I had come into the world crying they were filled with felicitous joy. And now that I was going to look for my happiness, they mourned and shed hot tears. No one can see others happy.

I had come out of the house. Death held my hand so fast as though afraid I might escape from her custody. The Clock Tower struck four in the distance, and I suddenly remembered it was time for the baby's milk. I asked Death to come in for a while, but she replied : "We haven't got the time. The roosters are heralding the dawn."

"So what ?" I said. "You are literally riding the storm and do not allow me even breathing space. You can wait in the room while I do the few things I must do."

She stood like a statue, undecided, perhaps, whether to go in or not.

Seeing her vacillate I said :

"Go in. I will not go back on my word. You have not seen my children. They are so lovely, especially my son. I am sure you will not be able to resist holding him in your arms. He is only nine months old, but he looks to be a year, so chubby he is. When I feed him, he utters such delightful love-cries, into my eyes. I just feel like putting him within my heart. Why don't you come in ? Come and see for yourself."

I made to enter the door, but she pulled me away and said sharply : "Don't be a sissy. Let us first complete the mission on which we are going. Who knows where she will be now. She has a hundred and one places to go. What will you do then ?"

"Maybe you are right."

And ignoring my children I went along with her.

Translated from the original Urdu by AHMED ALI

THE EXALTED BOURGEOIS!

NASIR AHMAD FAROOKI

It was the summer of 1958.

When I landed at the Karachi airport that humid afternoon, I was returning home after five years of globe-trotting as a newspaperman. Abu Enver came to receive me at the airport.

"Sonny Ahmad!" he exclaimed in delight, and embraced me as we Asians are wont to do on such occasions.

I hugged him warmly, and remarked that his greying temples gave him a very distinguished look.

"We have so much to talk about besides my greying temples," he said. "But first let's get your baggage out of the Customs. Have you anything to declare ?"

"Nothing but my genius," I answered smilingly.

"The joke is seventy years old, Sonny," Abu said, and added very softly, with tremendous sincerity : "This is the wrong country for this witticism."

"Does this reflect the low comedy of your existence, or the high tragedy of your idealism ?" I asked good-humouredly.

"Both," he said and began to laugh, and I laughed with him.

At this time Abu was in his late forties—a short, stocky fellow with an emphatic Oxford accent, closely cropped hair, and teeth yellowed by excessive smoking of medium brand English cigarettes, and, I suspect, never having been very

carefully brushed for the past twenty years. He was a wonderful conversationalist, an agnostic with fine shades of rationality, and a sincere friend.

I knew him in London rather intimately in 1950, when he was legal adviser to a British shipping company,

Abu laughed incessantly, and this had a contagious quality. The moment he laughed, one felt like laughing with him. His short, thick fingers would then begin to drum the table or the whisky glass in his hand. As the fingers slowed down, his laughter would gradually peter out, until suddenly the fingers would stop drumming and he would stop laughing. It was a comic aspect of Abu's physical bearing. And I liked him in spite of his grotesque mannerism, urbane modesty, and occasional foolish patronising tone. He was about eighteen years older than I. When I was still a toddler in school, he was probably playing cricket for the University in India, and speaking at the Oxford University Union debates. We had become friends because at a time when he was lonely, frustrated, friendless, and broke, I was his neighbour in Kensington Gardens. We often drove out together in the evenings and picked up our dates together. He invariably and very tactfully left me to walk the parks as he 'went l'amour' (as he called it) with his latest friend. One evening, after I had dropped a friend at her apartment, I rushed into my room with a terrible pain in the loins. I put on the radio, and lay twisting on the bed, hoping to feel better, when Abu walked into my room.

"What's the matter ?" he enquired with a show of kindliness.

"I've a terrible pain here," and I put my hands on the loins and the lower abdomen. "I suspect I am getting an attack of appendicitis."

Abu started laughing.

"You bloody fool," I screamed at him. "I don't see the joke in this."

"You've been kissing that wench you picked up at the museum. Did she say she went to the Slade Art School ?"

"But she does go to the Slade, and I visited her studio this evening. She makes beautiful landscapes."

"I'm not interested in her landscapes."

"But I am ! Do you think I should phone the doctor ?"

Abu looked at me, and the same cruel laughter rang out.

"For the first time in your life you have caressed a girl, you fool, and that's the trouble with you. Go to her studio, and go to bed with her."

For a moment I was dazed. Then it struck me that he made sense.

"By Jove ! Abu, you're right. But don't use this episode against me too often." And I left Abu.

Some two hours later I returned to my room. He came to see me. He did not ask me how I felt.

"Come, let's make some coffee and listen to Shostakovich," he said.

I have always liked listening to Shostakovich, the greatest living Russian composer, ever since I saw him conduct his own symphony at Carnegie Hall, New York.

The First Symphony not only bubbles with great revolutionary fervour, and brings out vividly the tempo of the march of socialism, but it also is a work of lyrical beauty. It is a bright, skilful, daring piece, full of dissonance and wild rhythms. And its vibrant, stripped, melodic lines at that time grasped me in the lusty atmosphere of a pure revolution.

We listened to the music, and sipped coffee. During the last part of the symphony Abu was beginning to doze. It was about four in the morning.

I waited for the record to finish, and woke him.

"What time is it ?" he asked.

"Four in the morning."

"Ah, yes ! In the real dark night of the soul it is always four o'clock in the morning."

And he sauntered away to his digs.

I did not get to see Abu for some days.

Then he phoned me at the office to inquire if we could drive to Paris that week end.

"By Jove," he said with childish exuberance. "I've got dues from the company, and I am two thousand quid richer. How about it ?"

"Shall I ask that girl at the Slade to come along ?"

"No, we'll do our hunting in Paris. Leave everything to me."

"That will be wonderful, Abu," I said.

I was not so sure about his great qualities as a woman killer. Certainly, in the London society he was hardly mentioned, in fact, not even known.

He had made friends with some schoolmarms, and during his years at Oxford had seduced some highly eligible girls; but now they were all married and had children. Abu still liked to be with girls in their early twenties, and this made the secretaries queuing at the bus-stop and the sales girls of Oxford Street his easy ambition.

When Abu was not with girls, he read books on philosophy, religion, art, literature, and very occasionally on economics. His was not a particularly fertile brain, but it was a successful assimilating organism. He could not be original, but he could provide quite just the right phrase for the right time. I often wondered what he talked about with women, for I could never imagine Lucy, the sales girl in the woollen section of Selfridges, being terribly interested in Gibbon and Voltaire. He probably discussed female anatomy with her or else spent a whole hour caressing her well developed breasts and kissing her none too voluptuous lips.

Abu and I went to Paris that week end, and we shared the same room in a hotel off the Etoile. It was the tourist season, and hotel accommodation was hard to get, so we agreed to share a single bedroom, I volunteering to sleep on the divan. We were in the mood to paint the city blue. No, red was too cliche a phrase for Abu to use. One afternoon, as we were coming from the Eiffel Tower, and walking towards the Faubourg St. Honore, Abu suddenly stopped, stared at a young lady with a red coat and long golden hair, and walked towards her.

"Ah, Madeleine !" he said in a loud, virile voice. "When did you get in from Montreal ?"

"Abu!" she said, trying to emphasise every vowel in that small word, "fancy meeting you in Paris !"

"Come, let's have tea together in some salon," Abu said. Then he realised I had not been introduced.

"Do forgive my bad manners," he said to Madeleine. "May I present my friend, Sonny Ahmad. He is a journalist."

Then turning to me he said: "This is Madeleine, the

most wonderful girl I've known in Ottawa, and she speaks beautiful French."

"Enchantee, monsieur," she said.

We had tea at a salon near the Opera, dinner at the Jour et Nuit, and then we went to Maxim's to see the floor show.

Abu talked most of the time ; I did a little talking, and all of the driving, while Madeleine did all the listening.

We left Maxim's to sit in a cave in the Latin Quarter. Abu regaled us with jokes. He knew no French. The others in the cafe didn't care a damn what he was talking about, but they were amused all the same.

"You know," he said, "right opposite my apartment in London, many years ago, lived a beautiful girl. One day she forgot to close the shutters while undressing and I saw her in the nude. I dreamt of her all night, and then I dreamt that my neck was growing longer and longer and that my head crawled out of the bed, out of the window, down the walls of the apartment, across the road, up the wall of her apartment, right through her window. And then my lips were right over her face and my eyes gazing at the nude body."

"What happened then ?" I enquired.

"Oui, tell me, Abu, what happened ; did you kiss her ?" Madeleine asked.

"Ah, no, my friends," he said. "I suddenly dreamt that a car was dashing down the street. I didn't want to be crushed under it, so I started pulling my neck from her face, down her window, on to the street, and up my window. Suddenly the car sped by, and I had a narrow escape."

We began to laugh, Madeleine in her soft, gentle way.

Then, in the most seductive English accent I have ever heard, she said softly: "You missed kissing her. Maybe it was the best thing for you. Love does not suit everyone. Yes !"

Suddenly, Abu's big protruding eyes became moist with gentleness.

"I never look back at life, but perhaps you're right," he said.

We met Madeleine the next day, and spent most of the time seeing the art galleries and museums.

The same night we drove back to London.

As I was driving up from Dover, I could not help telling Abu that we hadn't painted Paris red or blue. Madeleine had spoilt much of our fun. Without being obvious about it, or especially taken in by her charms, we had spent two days with her, and missed the sordid pleasure of life in Paris. We shall probably never see her again, and if we do it will be at best a chance meeting. But she had influenced him in her own silent, sensuous way. He wanted her company, without being very keen about her lips and her breasts. And when he left her he had no regrets.

"A week end in Paris could also end up like this," Abu sighed. And we talked no more of it.

A week later Abu met me by the Piccadily Tube station. We were both heading towards Kensington Gardens.

"Haven't seen you all these days, busy at the bureau ?"

"Rather tied up with the NATO talks," I said. "I inquired about you last night from Mrs. Wallace, and she said that you had gone to Manchester."

"I wanted to tell you about it," he volunteered. "I'm returning to Pakistan to start an independent legal practice."

"Do you think it's the best thing for you ?" I injected a note of caution. "From what I hear, Karachi is a terribly dull and unstimulating place, without any intellectual activity, and a social swirl which begins and ends at the Gourmet, a rather mediocre but expensive night club where third rate floor shows hold the audience, and for want of a better pastime people drink themselves to stupid bravado."

"I'll make my own society, and swirl it the way I want to," he said.

"When I pray, and this is very occasionally, I shall think of you and pray that your soul remains in one piece."

Abu left soon after, and I did not get to meet him again till the afternoon I arrived in Karachi.

* * * *

As I sat with him in the car at the airport, I felt that the man had changed. Physically, he had aged somewhat. His eyes bulged out a bit too much, as if at any moment they would pop out of their sockets like the cork from a champagne bottle. The crowsfeet around his eyes had become rutted and distinct, and there was a deep salinity over his dark, ruddy complexion. But his short, stout build exuded physical

energy and confidence.

"I could never imagine you loving and enjoying Karachi," I said. "You have outfoxed al! the cynics and disappointed me."

"Why should you be disappointed, Sonny ?" he asked. "After all, you too have returned to Pakistan to live and work."

"This is not it," I corrected him. "I'm here for a particular purpose. The moment it's over, I'll dash back to Geneva, New York, London, Peking, somewhere!"

"Are you assisting a revolutionary group in trying to overthrow a government ?"

"Perhaps trying to stop a revolution," I jested.

"Huh !" he muttered. "In Asia revolutions are not a joke. They can be terribly serious."

"But what is so wonderful about Karachi?" I returned to the subject.

"You know, love can't be converted into a symbol of the rationale. You try to be rational about love, and you can get into the damnest catacomb. It's a feeling of lyrical joy."

"Good Lord, Abu, you are in love ! Of all the incredible things ! The world is full of surprises. Now, give me the real reason why you like living in Karachi," I said cynically.

"Good heavens, no ! I think you have a one track mind, Sonny Ahmad."

"All right, Abu, lead me on to a second track."

Abu was quiet for a moment, carefully negotiated an S-turn near the hospital and said softly, as if ashamed to make the statement, but inwardly convinced that it was the noblest sentiment he ever had: "Yes, Sonny, I'm in love—with the society around me, however sham and immature and foolish it may be. I'm something great and wonderful to them. The best of the city honour me with their company, and feel pleasure in being with me. In London I'm just an unknown entity. Anonymity being a virtue to a degree only. Here with all my failings I am a Man, not an unknown clog. I enjoy this position, this prestige, this halo. I'm not prepared to exchange it for the high style of living in London or the Bohemian freedom of Chelsea. Sonny, in this society I am somebody !"

"What shallow gods you've made, Abu," I said. "But

if it keeps you happy, you have a point there. After all, happiness is both a means and an end in itself."

"How easily convinced can you get ?" he said.

"No, I'm not convinced. But I was finding the reasoning dialectical without being materialistic. And I chose not to argue with you."

"I'm not so sure myself," he said. "I really don't know if I like it here, or if this is what I want. But I'll wait and see."

We reached Abu's apartment. He showed me to my room, and after a hurried wash I joined him in the study. Books were lying scattered all over the room, on the table, on the floor. In the centre was a solitary easy chair, on which he sat while preparing his briefs.

"Would you like a drink ?" he inquired.

"I don't drink, Abu," I said. "I'll have a soft drink."

"Yes, of course. I thought you'd have grown out of this major defect in your character. After all, at that time you didn't know that you could get a pain in the loins by caressing women and not going to bed with them."

He began to giggle and I grimaced good-naturedly.

"You never did forget that," I said.

"It's so funny that whenever I think of it I can't help laughing. I must admit I enjoyed the pathetic condition of a male virgin, whose first intimacy with a girl is in her art studio. Anyway, how about a cider, your favourite drink ?"

"But can you get cider in Karachi ?" I wondered.

"My dear boy, you can get everything in Karachi—American cigarettes, smuggled gold, Spanish prostitutes, Persian rugs, and Hindu gods. This is the great metropolis of Asia."

Abu could be terribly disarming, and acutely cynical.

"I'll stick to cider for the moment," I said. "Maybe we'll catch up on the Hindu gods later."

Abu smiled his toothy smile and shouted for the bearer to get a *chotta* peg and a cider. He emphasised the cider, as if trying to tell the bearer that for once he had a friend in his apartment who did not drink.

"As a rule I don't trust people who don't drink," he said.

"Then you must trust all Europe, and distrust most of

Asia," I said. "And you have chosen to live in the wrong country."

But he did not let me score the point.

"You are positively right," he answered. "Try trusting the Pakistanis, and you'll end up in the gutter. Distrust them, fool them, be a Chicago hoodlum with them and they'll make you into a god. I know it. I have lived here eight years now."

"Come on, Abu," I said. "Make up your mind on the failures or virtues of our land. I've always doubted whether books on socialism and Ibsen's philosophy can take one very far in this social climate, but this is a sinister note you have introduced."

"I know what you mean," he cut me short, and said what I might not have dared to tell him: "I should open a meat barbecue shop here, make a fortune in this and then decorate the drawing room with books by Ibsen and Schiller. It's a cinch, and then, my dear man, I'll be the god of Karachi. This is a city of the *noveau riche*. Money is the important thing here, then comes pedigree ; ethical values matter least."

"I've been too out of touch to comment on this," I said. "And in any case I am not always for the doubtful ethical approach."

"Believe me," he said. "In this city when people with substance, largely out of black market earnings, brothels, and smuggling, talk of philosophy, our society calls them endearing names. If I were to talk about Marx and Engels, I'd be in the prison dubbed as a security risk, if not an outlawed Communist."

"You are too much of a bourgeois to think and talk like a Marxist, Abu," I said. "You'd be discovered as a phoney if you talked about Marx, notwithstanding your poverty. They won't put you in the jug, you're too harmless." Abu smiled. "But there's hope in what you say," I continued. "If this society can appreciate the doctrines of socialism and Ibsen and Dostoevsky as narrated by the rich, maybe, it will take it from the people who really mean what they say."

The bearer brought in the tray with drinks, and we toasted Chelsea and Hyde Park, Greenwich Village and the Latin Quarter, and all the other places where man is free to

think and free to be heard ; his bank balance, her vital statistics, his pedigree, her chateaus all a part of the larger cataclysm.

"And now we'll drink to all the beautiful women whom we admire but cannot seduce, and to all the books we should like to read but don't have the time to."

Abu chuckled. It was the manly laughter, that seemed to betray an intrinsic good humour beneath the finesse of a cultured Oxford accent.

"Abu," I said, with a look of concern and with all the honesty I could "Tell me, are you really happy here ? Is this the climate in which you and I, and our ilk can live and prosper and not die of suffocation and agony a hundred times a day ?"

"Find that out for yourself," he said. "Living by proxy is a dangerous thing."

"Probably, I'll end up finding it myself, but you have given so many versions of life here in one afternoon that I'm beginning to doubt your sincerity, or else your intellectual honesty."

"Isn't it stupid of you to ask me such a complicated question and want an answer in a simple sentence ? A million candles are lighted here each second, each hour, each day. Life comes and goes for the multitudes. But I'm not with them. I never have been. I belong to a different society. We talk of surrealism, of existentialism, of democracy, of economic rejuvination—and then we go to the Gourmet and get drunk, or go to the American Embassy reception, gulp gallons of martinis and abuse the Americans. Then we go to the Russian Embassy, devour their caviar, gulp their vodka, and abuse them. We think and talk and dream in English. This is our life here. In between we read Time magazine, the morning paper, and the New Statesman. Life continues, and the candles are lighted and extinguished. Young girls in Karachi blossom into youth, get seduced, or married, or simply disappear from the social set. Youngmen go to Oxford, and return to work for the government or British companies. The other side of life I don't know and don't care to know."

He paused and concluded: "There is such a sweet irrational charm in life here, that I don't really worry about

the epitaph on my tomb stone."

"Well, you've made a beautiful speech, Abu," I said. "And I still don't know where I stand. But tell me, in such an edifice of life and work, love and death—who'll light a candle for you ?"

* * * *

It was astonishing to find the long distance he had travelled emotionally in the past eight years. His was a typical Karachi existence (typical at least of the Karachi he belonged to), combining complacency with cynicism, a touch of the intellectual with a touch of the self-satisfied petty bourgeois. There was a ray of the revolutionary, and manifestations of the tragedy shadowing the life of the intelligentsia.

He moved in the best society and inwardly despised it; but he would have committed suicide out of sheer frustration if this society had begun to ignore him. He would eat beans and boiled potatoes the week-long to give a perfectly charming cocktail party once a month, and would unashamedly borrow transport, if his car was in the garage, to attend a cocktail party ten miles away.

He would tell politicians how to run parliament ; he would tell Cabinet Ministers how a cabinet should really function. It pleased him no end to draft a speech for some foolish Minister, rehearse it with him, and then benignly smile from the visitors' gallery as the Minister declaimed the same speech from the Treasury Benches. The speech would have references to Schiller and Rousseau, to Imam Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun. It would contain an Urdu couplet by Iqbal, and a quotation from the Holy Quran. The speech would ask for the consideration of the plight of the common man, which he equated with the woes of his bearer, the only common man he had the privilege of knowing. After the speech, the Cabinet Minister would look towards Abu, and if the performance had been to Abu's expectations he would nod and smile. The gesture of the Cabinet Minister, his looking up to him at the visitors' gallery, his meek smile—all added up to a major satisfaction in Abu's life.

Often the Cabinet Minister would double-cross Abu. He would get Abu's speech vetted by his principal secretary and change the whole lot of it, but not before telling Abu

how much he admired the draft, and the principles which were at the back of his mind ; only the stupid Prime Minister wanted it another way.

Abu had the good humour and intelligence not to press the point. He knew that many an other of his kind were just as keen as he to get the satisfaction of having their speeches read by the ministers in the House.

Abu would tell the capitalists and the *nouveau riche* how to double their investments ; at cocktail parties he would advise them to build general stores like Macy's in New York, or ice cream parlours, or air-conditioned movie houses. How about an air-conditioned vegetable market for the aristocratic women of Karachi, where they could buy their cabbages and tomatoes and salads, and discuss the latest dresses and hair styles, and the shades of saris they would be wearing that night at the reception by the Foreign Ministry ? Unlike the politicians, the capitalist social set attributed Abu's genius to too much whisky or a very unpractical fertile imagination—neither of them essential to high finance. But Abu even took this slight with good humour.

These were just the right ingredients for a successful man of the intelligentsia in Karachi ; flashes of genius, but the humour and tolerance to suffer insults ; delightful conversation, but no deep convictions ; no morbid love for wealth but only the craving to own a small new car and hi-fi record player.

This was an intelligentsia peculiarly Asian ; it was not the intelligentsia of Chekov, Gorky, and Turgenev ; it was not an intelligentsia which had rocked nations and societies.

As we sat in his study that night he suggested that we have coffee.

"I'd like it," I said.

"We'll have to make it ourselves then ; the seivant has knocked off for the day," he said.

"I've been doing it for eight years, Abu. I haven't lost the practice in two days."

I made the coffee, and we sat in his study.

"Let me play you a *sitar* recital by a friend of mine," he said. "I have it on the tape recorder."

Slowly, in gentle rhythms came the music from the *sitar*. There was no accompaniment to it, just the single instrument.

It was a beautiful piece on the coming of the rains. I could have recognised it anywhere, at any time. I had heard it so often. My face became tense with excitement as the music reached its finale. When the tape finished, Abu got up to play the reverse side.

"I know who is playing this," I said. "It's Mona Ali."

"Yes ! Hasn't she played it beautifully ? I always lose a bit of my soul when I listen to Mona's interpretation of the coming of the rains."

I sighed.

"Once she played such vibrant tunes on the *sitar*, and her life itself was a joyous melody." I said. "And now it seems an almost forgotten yesterday."

Abu's big eyes dimmed for a moment, and then he very softly said: "Perhaps it isn't dead after all. I'm marrying Mona next month."

I was stunned for a minute. We all knew her. There was hardly a person in Pakistan who did not know her. In eleven years that she had been around Pakistan, she had two unsuccessful marriages, over a dozen affairs, a still born child, and God knows how many abortions. Such a woman as Abu's wife ! The whole thing seemed incredible.

"Abu," I said finally, with self-control. "Do you really love her, or is it the mere vivacity of her appearance that has thrown you into a bourgeois passion ?"

"I should like to believe that I love her," he said.

"You do realize that you've come into her life too late," I said. "I wish she had fallen for you eleven years ago."

"Sooner or later, she would have found the right mate and consort. I believe I'm he."

I began to smile cynically.

"She and you could not have made a more unhappy choice," I said. "And much as I like you, I think the choice is singularly inept."

"What makes you say that ?"

"My dear Abu," I could not help being frank and tactless. "Mona is a nymphomaniac, a woman with an animal passion and no sincerity. We all know that she goes to bed with anyone who overawes her emotionally or physically. You are an intellectual. Don't sacrifice what is best in you for her. She is not worth it."

"You are being very unkind," Abu said, not seeming to mind my curt remarks about his future wife. "Her life is like an open book and she just believes in the acts of love for the sake of love. Why, these are the attributes of a goddess...."

"Or a bitch," I interrupted him.

Abu's face sallowed. Then anger flushed into his big brown eyes.

"I forbid you to talk like this," he said.

"It is heartless to remind you that she is not your personal property or your exclusive charge. Her affairs and scandals would shock anyone. She has no principles in life, no rudder, no helm. Your marriage to her would end in disastrous tragedy."

"You must have the grace to be kind to her, and give her a chance, and me your loyalty as a friend," he said.

"If you can reform her, love her, and have her love you—why, I'd give the rest of my life serving you both. But I know how impossible it is. You're too mild-mannered, too sedate and too cultured to keep her within the bounds of marital obligations. When she'll double-cross you, why, you'd commit suicide. After all, you are a bourgeois."

"Maybe when you meet her you'll change your mind," he said.

"Don't hurt my intelligence by being so stupid about it all," I said not too casually.

And then suddenly Abu clasped in his two hands a portrait of Mona, fiercely kissed the frame, and screamed : "She is not a bitch. She is not what you all say she is. She is my goddess. She is my Mother Earth."

And tears began to flow down from his big eyes.

"Abu," I said totally overcome by this scene, "the candle flickers."

GABRIEL'S WINGS

SHAHED ALI

A tiny hut stood among the trees on the left side of the street which cuts across Azimpur and goes towards Peelkhana Road. Exposed to the sun, rain and wind, the mud walls of the hut were not quite intact. Through the holes in the rusty tin-window one could see bits of the blue sky.

Mother and son lay on the mat. In the evening Haleema had thrashed Nabi very hard. Now seven years old, the boy was apprenticed to a *bidi* shop in order to earn his living. His father died when he was a baby. To support themselves, Haleema had sometimes to sit near the cemetery gate to beg when her irregular earnings as temporary domestic help were not enough for their needs.

People coming to pray over their relations' graves would now and then leave her a few coins.

Still only an apprentice, Nabi did not get any wages. The owner of the shop gave him his afternoon meal ; that was all. He was promised five rupees a month provided he picked up *bidi*-making to perfection. But of late Nabi had been playing truant ; he would leave the shop on some pretext or other to go to a place no one knew. He could not be seen till dusk. So far the owner had complained to Haleema three times. Today he came to warn her about giving him the sack as he had no use for such wayward boys.

The whole afternoon Haleema fumed with anger over the boy's disobedience. The thought of his future troubled her

even more. Having no outlet for her rage, she carried on a silent harangue within herself : why should that ass of a son work anyway ! Isn't his mother there to beg for him, to work as a servant to feed him !

As soon as she saw Nabi enter the house in the evening, Haleema gave him another thrashing. She insisted on his telling her where he had been ; but no answer came from the boy. All that he did was to sob violently. Afterwards, he fell asleep without taking his meal. Haleema sat down to eat hers but after a few morsels which she swallowed unwillingly she got up. She remembered how the child had opened his eyes only to close them immediately, when she had begged him to eat. She sat down on the mat, her eyes seeking the sky through the broken walls, her hand on the sleeping boy. Tonight her heart ached violently at the thought of having beaten him, though at times she would feel no remorse even when the stick with which she beat him broke on his back. She told herself how wrong it was to blame him who was so young and innocent. She could not help pitying herself when she thought of her double responsibility of acting as both mother and father to the boy. She thought of the days when she would be dead, wondering how Nabi would support himself then. As her eyes filled with tears, she kissed the child on the brow. Nabi opened his eyes suddenly and pointing towards the door shouted :

'Hey mother ! Who's that ?'

'Where ?' asked the astonished Haleema.

'There he goes !' Extending his right arm Nabi again pointed towards the way the unknown person went.

'There is no one,' Haleema said.

'Why do you want to keep it from me ?' Nabi was cross. 'Didn't I see the handsome man ? What a glorious complexion, mother, and what clothes !'

'Handsome man?' Haleema's astonishment grew.

'Yah,' Nabi said with dilated eyes. 'He brought sweets ; aren't they with you ?'

"Yes, I believe your story,' groaned the sad Haleema, pained by what she thought to be Nabi's ingenious way of wish fulfilment. 'Go to sleep, Nabi. In the morning you shall have sweets.'

'Where did the man come from, mother ? Did you see his wings ?'

'Wings?'

In the semi-darkness of the half-lit room, she looked at Nabi with eyes sharpened by uncomfortable astonishment.

'Yah, wings—gorgeous ones ! Like a peacock's plume.'

Haleema hugged her boy and stroking his back said in a tender voice : 'An angel must have come. Tonight is *shab-e-barat*, the night when everyone's luck will be decided. The angels are going from house to house to see how everybody is.'

Nabi's body tingled with expectancy. In his excitement he left the bed. The night was beautiful. The earth was bathed in bright liquid silver of the moon. Even at that late hour, from the nearby mosque came voices reciting Quranic verses. The cemetery was still teeming with people. In their belief that they could communicate with the souls of their dead, all forgot their sleep, all prayed to Allah for their own happiness and the fulfilment of their hopes and desires. Only Nabi and Haleema were wasting the night in sleep while God's angel passed by their door without being told about their needs and desires. Haleema lit the lamp to be able to examine Nabi's expressions and movements better.

'Aren't you hungry, dear ? Will you have your food now ?' she asked without getting an answer. Nabi had forgotten his hunger in a sweet but difficult speculation : if the angels took messages to God, had they told Him about his mother and himself ?

'Did you tell the angel anything, mother ?' he asked. Haleema kept silent wondering at him.

'He passed by our door and you said nothing. Why didn't you call me ?' He was choked with disappointment.

'You are crazy !' rejoined his mother bitterly. 'Why should the angels listen to us ? They come to ask after the rich. If one of them passed by our door it was only to go to their house.'

'Why don't you say your prayers ?' asked Nabi in an unpleasant bossy tone, breaking a long silence.

'What will prayers do ?' Haleema's voice betrayed supreme disgust.

'Why do you talk like this ?' Nabi flared up. 'Angels come only to those who pray ! And God also listens to them.'

'No, my boy, no !' Haleema nearly screamed. 'God is sleeping under His rug. Only those who worship Him with gold and silver are listened to. Our plain prayers cannot move Him.'

Nabi got more perplexed, thinking that if his mother was right then the poor had nobody to look up to. Without gold and silver they could never have their desires fulfilled. This explained why so many poor people constantly prayed and never got rich and that was why the rich got even richer. But if God created all, why this partiality. Did He never feel sorry for the poor ?

In spite of these thoughts, Nabi could not help thinking of the angel with the fiery complexion, with a peacock's multi-coloured wings and his whole frame giving out a wonderous perfume. He could visualize the white horse with the swaying waist, carrying the angel. Only if he had been awake at the time he would have lain on the angel's way and compelled him to listen to his endless sorrows. If the angel refused to show interest, he would have clung to his wings till he was carried to God, Whom he would have surely awakened with his shouts. If He still remained asleep, Nabi would have scratched Him all over till He bled and woke up. Nabi went back to bed, his brain crowded with thoughts. Haleema too lay down after putting out the light. Though she could not see Nabi in the darkness, she was aware of his being wide awake with a strange restlessness. Stroking his back she said : 'It's late, darling. Go to sleep.' Nabi watched the sky in silence while his imagination was tiring itself to find a solution to his problem. There was such a flood of moonlight and yet so much darkness. Then a flash of lightning as it were lit up his eyes. He thought he knew it now. He would tie a string to the feet of God's *Arsh* and thus shake Him up.

The next day, after eating the left-overs of last night's rice with water, and being bullied by his mother, Nabi wen. reluctantly to work. Haleema had exhorted him : 'You have to build your own fortune ; just begging God won't do.'

As he bound the *bidi* leaves along with the other boys,

Nabi's mind wandered in the quiet woods of Peelkhana bordered by a growth of *Phani Manasha*. Every day he slinked out of the shop to fly his kite from there. None knew of this. Stomach-ache was his excuse for running away from the shop. Today he was more restless than ever.

When he reached home, he was over-joyed to find that his mother was not in. Taking advantage of her absence, he rummaged in three deep and empty cooking pots and found two annas, which were to him equal to seven kingdoms. Grasping his spoil firmly in his fist he ran to Nawabganj, bought some thread, and started running again with the expectation of a great event stirring in his breast.

Inside the woods was a forsaken, ruined mosque. From one of its dark crevices, he took out his kite and wheels. It was this kite which often carried him beyond the world to the open regions. Though he was loquacious about all his other exploits, about the kite he did not utter a word to anyone.

After a while he came to the quiet corner with the *Phani Manasha* in Peelkhana. Tying the old bit of thread with the new one, he flew his kite. As it gained height, an uncontrollable joy made him restless. A smile spread from his mouth to his eyes which were now shining with the lustre of his happiness.

He felt today he was going to reach the feet of *Arsh*.

As the kite grew smaller, he was running short of thread. It grieved him to find the kite still within sight though his thread was finished. Perhaps God's throne wasn't that near. He must be sleeping far away beyond man's sight. To reach Him, he needed much more thread for which there was no money. Did this mean their sorrows were never to end? Nabi moaned in despair. As long as flying kites remained his hobby, he drew unmixed pleasure from it. But now the kite had a special significance for him and instead of giving him pure joy, it filled him with a nameless sorrow.

Winding up the bit of thread he had, he put the kite back in its hiding place. He knew that asking his mother for money would mean such a hard thrashing that the skin of his back would come off. He feared what was in store for him once the theft of the two annas was discovered by his mother. He consoled himself with the thought that in order to bring about a

change in their fortunes they would have to spend a little money, even bear some losses. In his mother's absence he looked into all the utensils and bundles of old clothes in search of money. Not a paisa was to be found anywhere. To buy only one meal a day, his mother had to spend every bit of the little money she earned as a maid and as a beggar-woman. Saving anything was out of the question.

Nabi had a brilliant idea, that of going to the station to earn some money as a porter. After waiting for a long time, Nabi saw a train coming. He was quite dazzled by the great number of passengers and the variety of clothes they wore. People shouted for porters. Nabi was unlucky ; he could not attract a single passenger. His eyes fast filling with tears and arms outstretched towards the passengers, he was mistaken for a beggar by many. Some even gave him a lecture on the dignity of labour and the infamy of begging. One or two pushed him mercilessly out of their way.

When the train left, Nabi sat down in despair, thinking of the many more days they would have to starve, of their inability to wear new clothes even once a year. They were still wearing the clothes patched and mended a hundred times over, which his dead father had bought them. The walls of their hut were crumbling, the slightest rain left pools on its floor. Only if their desires reached God would their sorrows end. But Haleema never said her prayers and Nabi hadn't had a chance to learn Arabic verses. So he thought it only natural that God did not hear them.

When, after about an hour, another train arrived, he was cheerful again. Beckoned by a strong wrist with a watch on it, he came before a first class compartment. The gentleman pointed towards his holdall and attache case saying: 'Could you take these to the waiting room ?'

'Certainly, sir,' Nabi replied confidently, 'if you would put them on my back.'

'How much do you want ?' The passenger asked smiling.

'I need a lot of money. How much can you give ?'

The man's eyes grew sharp. Looking at Nabi intently, he said : 'What a strange boy ! What will you do with so much money ?'

'Why, I'll buy thread—lots of it for my kite,' he said, greatly

surprised by the man's query.

The man burst out laughing as he put the luggage on Nabi's back. When they reached the waiting room the passenger took out four annas instead of the usual one anna, saying : 'Here you are ! You can buy heaps of thread now.'

'I won't have it.' Nabi threw the coin on the floor. 'What will four annas do ! I need a lot of thread. My kite has to reach the end of the sky.'

The man picked up the coin and asked good-humouredly : 'What good will it do if your kite reaches the sky ?'

'Why, I'll pull God's throne ; why should He listen only to you and not to us ?'

He spoke with agitation. The atmosphere in the waiting room suddenly became heavy. Everyone was speechless. The man gave him an eight-anna bit. Nabi's eyes were full of gratitude.

'When we have money you must come to our house. I'll fill your pocket with coins then', the boy declared with perfect sincerity. The passengers at last laughed. 'Of course I'll come. We'll all come that day,' said Nabi's benefactor with enthusiasm.

Nabi did not wait to hear the rest of his speech. When, after buying the thread, he came home, dusk had fallen. He had hidden the thread in the crevice of the ruined mosque where his kite was. Haleema was boiling rice which she had got by begging. Rubbing her eyes she asked : 'Where have you been, dear ?'

Her affectionate tone pleased Nabi, but he wondered whether his mother had time to look for the money. Feeling sure that she handn't, he thanked God silently.

'I went for a walk, mother, after finishing at the shop,' he lied with perfect ease.

Haleema pushed some more twigs into the oven and said : 'Don't you run away from the shop again. Once you have picked up the work, you will earn lots of money, darling. We have no other means but this.' Then looking at his face she asked anxiously : 'You are hungry, aren't you, my boy ?'

His mother's pleasing tones seemed to take away his hunger. The satisfaction of buying all the thread he wanted, and such unexpected sweetness from his mother, made it a

memorable day for Nabi.

'No, mother, I am not hungry. I had my meal at the shop,' he said smiling.

'Good. The less you eat of this begged food, the better for you. It spoils luck.'

But when the cooking was done, they both ate the detested rice with relish. The next day, on the pretext of going to the shop, Nabi left the house early. The weather seemed ideal for his chosen activity and the great quantity of thread in his possession made him confident about reaching the sky. With a beating heart, he pressed the kite to himself. As it took the air dancing and started going higher and higher trembling in desperate courage, his eyes enlarged with emotion. His breathing became faster, his lips opened into a strange smile. The bright pupils of his eyes danced to the movement of the kite. When he felt that his wheel did not roll anymore, which meant that the thread was finished, he was again on the verge of tears. All that thread gone, and still the kite was within sight !

He had to bring it down. He wondered why God had His seat so far away. Probably the distance ensured His sound sleep. Wasn't there enough thread in the world to reach His throne so that it could be shaken ? Nabi's thwarted will now became rebellious. Hiding his kite in the mosque, he went to the station again to earn money to buy more thread—the thread with which he intended to hurl God down among His creatures made of earth.

He could not earn more than two annas which was hardly sufficient for the great quantity of thread he needed.

With each day's earnings he kept buying new thread and tied it with what he had before. The quiet nook in *Peelkhana* had become almost his private possession. These days every visit to the place filled him with a terrible sadness as he exhausted his thread. But giving up the venture was out of the question. The thought that success was imminent increased his determination. Whatever money he earned at the station or in the market as a porter was spent on buying thread which got longer and longer because of constant addition. With the shop, which provided him with the excuse for leaving home, he had no connection whatsoever.

One day when the kite had become a black spot and lost itself in the sky, Nabi trembled as he watched it. A pitiful, expectant smile appeared on the child's lips as his brow perspired and his breath almost stopped with excitement. There seemed to be a tug-of-war between heaven and earth. His hand, as it gripped the thread, felt the terrible tension, as if someone invisible was pulling at the other end and making its veins swell. Today he was determined not to wind up the thread ; he would let his kite wander in the sky, following its own will and law. When it caught the feet of God's throne, there would be a hard pull from above, which Nabi would counter-act by pulling it down, so that God's throne would shake violently. Suddenly frightened out of His sleep, God would be forced to look at man, to listen to His creatures' woes.

His eyes were fixed on the point where the thread split the sky like a bridge between heaven and earth. White, black, multi-coloured clouds moved past it and the thread vibrated with their pressure. He saw the clouds being divided by the thread. Although he did not know where God's throne was, he felt that he had flown the flag of his revolt towards His throne which could not be very far any more. He had forgotten his hunger and his mother's existence. He clung to the wheel even after dusk. His thread did not catch at anything yet. After sometime he brought the kite down and hugged it passionately. Bending himself he looked down at it, stroking it gently. The kite seemed moist, and had a stange odour. He rejoiced at the thought that God had wept over his sorrows. There was no need, then, to pull at the throne since God had already wept for His creature. Nabi felt confident about the end of their hardships.

On coming home, he found his mother lying in bed with fever. She had come back in the afternoon without earning a paisa. Doubt assailed Nabi all over again : if God had wept for them why should his mother get fever and why should they have no food ? Then it wasn't God's tears but Satan's urine. Satan never wished man's desires to reach God ! Possibly to cross the seven spheres of the sky, as described in Holy Books, he needed more thread.

In the morning, though still unwell, Haleema got up to look for some food for the boy. When she came back she did

not join Nabi in the meal.

'Won't you eat mother ?'

'No,' Haleema said in a feeble voice. 'You eat and then go to the shop.'

Nabi drank the broth his mother had begged for him. Haleema smiled sadly but did not make any remark. When Nabi left in a tired manner, she did not imagine that he was going to the station first and then to his favourite spot to fly the kite.

Nothing could stop him now. He threw up his hands towards Him whose pitiless light had once burnt down Mount Sinai.

One evening, on coming home, he found his mother extraordinarily cheerful. She was wearing a new *sari* and waiting for him with fresh rice and curry served in plates. Sitting down at once to eat he asked : 'Where did you get all this ?'

'Don't you remember that the Kahertuli zamindar's wife died ? It was her *fateha.* They distributed money and heaps of clothes ?' Although she had temperature, watching Nabi eat so heartily she immediately felt better.

'Look, I even asked for a *lungi* for you.'

When she showed the garment to Nabi, he was convinced that God had turned His face towards them ; that He was at last awake. With moist eyes he ejaculated : 'Mother, didn't I tell you that we were not to remain poor for long !'

Haleema had never taken her son's speculations seriously, but today she was inclined to believe in what the boy said as Nabi's eyes brightened with the hope of a kinder future.

But when the days of semi-starvation came back again, Nabi was overcome with bitterness and doubt. Did God play with His creatures then ?

One day in desperate need of more thread, he thought of the angels who could carry messages to God. Why had they become so inactive, when they could easily carry his kite to God ?

On Monday, Nabi came out of the house without his meal. The sky was cloudy. As the pressure of the thread made his body vibrate, he was again filled with an irrepressible joy, his imagination soaring upwards like a golden eagle. Suddenly he saw a huge bird circling round the dot which his

kite now was. Sometimes the bird got lost among the clouds and appeared again with its huge wings. Nabi's thread got entangled in its feathers and he felt a hard pull. He was filled with fear as the bird started going up with the kite at a terrific speed. Suddenly Nabi felt the loosened thread falling downwards while the kite kept circling round along with the bird. He realised that his dream of shaking God's throne would never come true. He looked up at the kite with tearful eyes, a pitiful solitary figure in the deserted place. Like a black dot, the kite followed the bird as it soared upwards.

Suddenly it occurred to Nabi that it was not a bird but the angel Gabriel come in the guise of a bird in order to carry his kite to God. Now his tears were those of gratitude and his face shone with a wonderful smile in which the shadow of his former disappointment was mingled with his new hope. He felt ashamed of his stupid despair.

So while he was crying over his lost kite, the angel had at last come to fulfil his heart's desire ! When he looked up again after drying his eyes he found that both bird and kite had disappeared. Only bits of a blue and brilliant sky could be discerned through the clouds.

He came home in a prancing gait filled with triumph, his smile betraying his happiness.

Haleema was cleaning some leaves she had picked for dinner.

'Mother !' Nabi cried jumping into her lap. Haleema's face darkened, she bit her lips and seized Nabi by the neck.

'Where have you been all day, you son of an ingrate ! Today I'll teach you !' she shouted.

Nabi could not understand the reason of his mother's anger, and went on to give her the great news : 'Mother, I've seen Gabriel today. Our miseries—!'

Before he could finish, Haleema began showering blows on his back. 'I spit on Gabriel's face !' she cried. 'Are the angels to feed us while we sit at home doing nothing ?'

'Mother, please mother, don't abuse Gabriel. It is a sin. God will be cross!' Nabi remonstrated.

Angered more by the correction, Haleema let a torrent of abuse flow from her mouth making Nabi bite her hand.

The owner of the *bidi* shop had come to tell her that from

that day Nabi was sacked as he hadn't shown up for a long time. He had also told her that Nabi ran to the station every now and then and flew kites all day. Choked wih anger, Haleema had been waiting for the rascal to return.

Now she got hold of a sharp twig and hit him on the head, on his arms and back.

'You son of an ingrate, as if all my head-ache is not about your welfare ; and you have been deceiving me ! Gabriel will bring you plate-fulls of rice when I am in the grave !'

His back wounded badly, Nabi cried out in pain and then cutting into Haleema's body with his teeth made it as bloody as his own. Then losing consciousness, he dropped down on the floor.

Haleema had temperature in the night. Nabi had not eaten anything. He lay in one corner frowning and pouting and sometimes casting hostile glances at his mother. When he fell asleep, he dreamt that Gabriel was soaring up with his kite through the clouds. The blue sky divided to make way for him. Then the clouds enveloped his path again. As soon as the door of the sixth heaven opened, Gabriel's wings caught fire, but still he sped on with the kite, and then opened the gate of the seventh heaven letting out an unbearably bright flash of light which nearly blinded Nabi. Covering his eyes with his hands he cried: 'Mother ! my eyes are burnt !'

When he got up rubbing his eyes, the sharp rays of thesun reaching through the cracks in the walls of the hut fell on his face.

Translated from the original Bengali by RAZIA KHAN.

THE CHASM

A. HAMID

The artist was sitting on his bed, his back against the wall. He was looking through a book. On an old, faded, rickety book-shelf in the corner were heaps of books, irregularly arranged. On the lower rack were all sorts of things ; half-used messy colour-tubes, worn-out brushes, half-finished sketches, pencils, erasers, and rusty geometrical instruments. There were pictures on the walls, none of them hanging quite straight. Some of them were in frames ; some had been just pasted on cardboard. On the wall facing the bed was a picture of Shakespeare. It showed him leaning on an elbow, pen in hand, lost in deep thought. Sitting close to this wall was his old mother, spinning yarn on a wheel. There was a constant, insistent drone, which only stopped when she left off to pick up another fluffy wad of cotton.

The faint noise of the spinning wheel was like a thousand flies humming wistfully in the room. Sometimes the thread would snap and everything would become suddenly quiet. She would carefully re-arrange the thread and the drone would start again. Her *dupatta* would slip down from her head revealing hair white as newly fallen snow. They must have been black years ago, black and shimmering with youth, fragrant like a grove of sandal trees. The spinning wheel of time had turned them snow-white. The dust and weariness of a lifetime of hard work had settled upon them.

Sitting next to his mother, on a mat, was his younger sister Zeb, who was in school. Her *dupatta* was thread-bare

and full of patches. She was memorising her English lesson.

"What a big cake !"

"May I have it ?"

"No, you may not have it."

But Zeb was dying to eat that piece of cake, because she hadn't had anything to eat since last night. Nobody had; her artist brother, her mother, her old grandfather. There was nothing to eat. In her primer was a coloured picture of the cake. Zeb couldn't take her eyes off it. She had never eaten a cake. While going to school, or on her way home, she had seen these beautiful cakes in bakeries, luscious and tempting behind their glass windows. Sometimes they made tiny little green trees of pure sugar on them. Sometimes it was a crown. In the beginning she used to think these were children's caps, but one day her friend Saadat, whose father was a waiter in a restaurant, told her that these were not caps at all. These were cakes which were meant to be eaten. At the mere thought, Zeb's mouth watered. She wondered how people ate all those unbelievably large things. She pictured a child eating them : his lips besmeared with the icing on top. And involuntarily, she ran her tongue over her lips to wipe them clean. When Zeb used to pass in front of these restaurants, she would always linger for a while, look longingly inside and then pass on. She would catch a fleeting sight of people sitting around tables, eating and drinking. Her throat would always go dry on such occasions.

Zeb would see all this and run her tongue over her lips and come home. Her brother didn't manage to sell his paintings very often. When he did they ate two meals a day for a few days. Usually it was very hard going, with nothing at all to eat. She had never known a day when there was enough to eat at the house, especially since their father died.

At least, twice a week she had to go to school without breakfast. On such days she felt terrible. She wouldn't be able to concentrate in the class and when other girls played, she would simply sit down and watch them. During the recess other girls would throng around the canteen and buy sweet and sour drops and fruit, while she would go into the school yard where there was a mulberry tree under which she would stand and pick out the mulberries which had fallen on the ground.

In the class she always used to feel as if there were a chasm between her and the teacher which she couldn't bridge.

On her way home, passing through the main street, she would look longingly at the glittering fruit shops. She always felt like getting into one of those huge fruit baskets and go to sleep. Then she would imagine herself in a lush and misty garden of fruit trees where she would be sitting beside a running brook with her two feet in the water and the maddening smells of summer all around her. During the summers, the main street always used to be very dusty. In the air there always seemed to hang an aroma of petrol fumes and cow dung. Next to the mosque there was a confectionery shop owned by a fat man with a big black moustache. He always sat there very watchfully. Zeb used to have a vision of herself with a big basket slung on her shoulder, filled with all the cakes, tarts and biscuits stolen while the big fat man was snoring away one hot summer afternoon.

She even used to dream about these big, beautiful cakes, colourful like the rainbow. Once she dreamt that she was in a big confectionery shop full of cakes and she wanted to eat them, but somehow she couldn't. Then the most gorgeous of the cakes suddenly spoke up : 'Are we not splendid ?' And Zeb asked very politely: 'May I please eat you ?' 'No, you may not,' the cake answered. 'You will never eat any cakes.'

Zeb was down on the mat trying to memorise her English lesson. Her old mother was at the spinning wheel. Her eyes were tired and faded. Her lips were dry and chipped like a piece of land which has seen no rains. Her head was bent and grey. It was the grey of the earth, the grey of barren earth, of scorched and starving earth. All over and all around were thousands of buzzards. There was famine, there was death and hunger. Death was like an infinite sheet which had spread from one part of the horizon to another. There was nothing to eat at the house. The shelves were full with books and next to Zeb was her old grandfather, head bent between his two hands, pale and emaciated like a corpse. His spectacles had slipped down from the bridge of his gnarled nose, because the thread which had kept them fixed together had become loose. His hair was like scorched desert grass. He was a heap of ashes, gone old since long. He too hadn't eaten anything since last

night. He was perhaps thinking of those days before the First War when everything was cheap and for a rupee you could buy a donkey-load of wheat. Those distant days when there was peace and sunshine and time was like a gentle river flowing through undulating plains.

Over his head, on the wall, Zeb had scrawled in pencil the following calligraphic exercise in Urdu:

Always be grateful to God.
Do not eat fruit in winters.
Do not eat fruit in summers either.
We are all asses.
Be grateful to God.
Written by Zeb Khanum, Class 5-B.

A jute curtain hung at the door. It had many holes. Through one of these Zeb could see the white mausoleum of the saint. Every Thursday, people used to come there with candles and incense and gifts of food. The street urchins later used to feast upon these offerings. And till the next Thursday, the mausoleum would remain deserted. Sometimes an old man or woman would stop by and pray there. The flowers would fade away and the wind would blow them into the dirty gutter that ran close by. The artist could see an old woman standing there praying. One of her hands was covering her nose because the gutter stank and she was only praying with one hand, which looked very funny. After she had finished, she picked up a few faded and dried up flowers from the grave and kissed them very devoutly. The sun was now on the house tops and the street was silent and forlorn. In the house next to theirs, the rich contractor's fat and noisy daughters were sitting in the verandah, eating fruit and sweet-meats their father had brought for them from the bazar.

The artist looked up at Shakespeare's portrait on the wall. He was leaning on an elbow, lost in deep thought. What was he thinking ? Was he trying to conceive Hamlet ? Was he thinking of something beautiful that Juliet had said to Romeo ? Out in the street he could hear Chaudhri Nawab Din discussing loudly with one of his associates the day's rates in the vegetable market. Both were thinking, Shakespeare and Chaudhri Nawab Din. There was really no difference between the two. If one had given mankind Hamlet, Macbeth and Juliet,

the other had given them turnips, tomatoes and cabbage.

The artist's eyes returned to the book he was holding. But he didn't read it. The tin can, which was supposed to be filled with flour, was empty. Shakespeare was lost in thought. The kitchen was cold and hostile. On the shelf were Iqbal's books. Volumes which contained great poetry, poetry that glorified man, incited him to action. But Iqbal was silent. Arnold's Light Of Asia had gone out. Everything was deathly quiet. The old man had dozed off to sleep.

The Buddha had said: 'The earth grows grain for everybody. If only men would share what the earth yields so bountifully, there would be no unhappiness on earth.'

And mother was spinning her wheel silently. She had no answer to give to the Buddha. What could she tell him ? No earth had grown any grain to feed her. Nobody had shared the bounty of the earth with her. And Khalil Gibran raised his finger and looked at the sky and declaimed: 'Wouldn't it have been blissful if we did not have to eat? If we could only live on the fragrance of the wild flowers that God creates !'

The old man kept dozing. And only the meek shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. But you will have to die to reach the Kingdom, and his grandfather was still alive. When you are alive, you have to have something to eat. You do not want a heaven, neither do you want the fragrance of wild flowers.

'May I eat this ? No, you my not.' Zeb was reading her lesson rather loudly now. Why was she reading these lines again and again ? Couldn't she just memorise them once for all and pass on to the next lesson ? She should throw out the cake from her consciousness. She didn't need it. She only needed the fragrance of wild flowers. She should live on the fragrance of wild flowers. She is meek. She should die, in fact.

He lit up a *bidi* and drew upon it deeply. The smoke hit his empty stomach as spirit on a recently suffered abrasion. He remembered that he hadn't eaten anything since last night. In the morning he had gone to attend a convention of painters. There, for hours, they had discussed the changing trends of art and art as a means of solving social problems. Many resolutions were passed. Many impassioned speeches were made! 'We are the painters of the new humanity.' 'We are steeped in

our traditions.' 'Our fingers are at the pulse of humanity.' 'Our art demands a sacrifice from us.' 'It requires our blood.'

He wanted to stand up and shout so that everybody would have heard: "We have no blood. None of us has any blood. I don't have it, nor my mother, nor Zeb, nor my grandfather. You have to have bread to have blood. And we are hungry. We want bread. Bread is art. When bread and art meet, man creates the Taj, the Pyramids, the magic palaces of Alhamra. Kalidas writes *Shakuntala*, Milton writes *Paradise Lost*, Iqbal writes *Javed Nama*. When there is no bread, *Shakuntala* dies, *Javed Nama* becomes so much waste paper. Nothing remains. Even God dies. Give us bread and we shall paint without blood."

But he just kept sitting there, listening to all these speeches and slogans. After the convention, all the people's artists went into an expensive restaurant. He came home.

Suddenly the jute curtain was raised and his elder sister, Apa Atti, entered. She had come after many days. His mother stopped spinning. Zeb jumped up and embraced her sister. The old man woke up. Mother rose up and took her daughter into her arms. There were tears in her eyes, which she wiped off with her *dupatta*. Apa Atti looked at her brother and said: "What has gone wrong with you? You never even visit your sister."

The artist smiled and kept quiet. Apa Atti sat down on the cot and started pressing the old man's shoulders. Another girl had entered with her. She was thin and was wearing a *burqa*, which she took off and placed in a corner of the room. She sat down on the ground with mother and they started talking very quietly. Mother asked: "Will you stay for a few days this time ?"

"Yes, about ten days or a fortnight."

"Gujranwala must be very hot ?"

"Oh yes, very."

She was pale. She was wearing a shirt with big crimson flowers. Zeb was watching her shirt very intently. The girl was looking at the pictures on the wall with her big black eyes. The artist was trying to read his book. In his mind was the empty tin can. Mother looked at him once or twice with anxious eyes but he never looked up.

"Wouldn't it have been blissful if we could only live on the fragrance of wild. . . ."

He drew upon his *bidi* and said to himself: "Wouldn't it have been blissful if these guests hadn't come just now?" This strange girl who has come to the house for the first time. Not that it really matters. He looked at her once. She was perhaps beautiful, but then he suddenly thought of her mother who had a pale, emaciated face, from whose eyes life was dying out every day. Then he suddenly thought of his sister and the old man and that all of them were hungry. It was a terrible realisation. He forgot about everything, even about this pale girl who had come with his sister.

From the neighbouring mosque the call of the *muazzin* rose in the air. "God is great. God is great."

He quietly got up and went out.

Evening was falling. Shops were closing. People had come out for their evening walk in light and clean clothes. He could hear music from the radio. He went towards the road which led you to a garden outside the city proper. There were lots of people there, eating, drinking, smoking, playing games. There were children running about and old men taking slow walks. The ground was littered with empty cigarette packets and other rubbish. It was a quiet evening.

He looked at the crimson west. He said to himself that it was very beautiful, but he didn't really believe it. This was an academic feeling. He felt as if everything was dead. He felt as if the universe was absurd. It had no meaning. And what was life ? It was like a stinking and putrefying corpse that one pulled out from the debris of a fallen house. He stood there for some time, then very deliberately started walking towards home.

The next day a most unexpected thing happend. He received some money for a painting he had sold many days ago on credit. In the evening, he took a bath, changed, lit a cirgarette and started walking towards Apa Atti's house. He wanted to tell his sister that he didn't always stay at home, that he also was capable of visiting people. The moon was rising in the east and everything looked a cold silver. The breeze was gentle and good. At Apa Atti's house, he took his little nephew on his lap and caressed him for a long time. He

wanted to caress the whole universe. Life seemed to him one long, perpetual, honeyed kiss of young love.

Apa Atti was down in the courtyard and he was talking to her sitting on the same cot. Suddenly a girl came down from the room upstairs. She had a little plush box in her hand. When she saw him, she hesitated for a moment, then proceeded to show the little box to Apa Atti. "Isn't it a beautiful ring ?" she said.

He was left breathless. She had a soft and musical voice. She spoke beautifully. She had a golden skin, like honey mixed with milk. She looked like a marble palace in distant moonlight, like an evening in a grove of poplars. She was wearing a pale yellow shirt with big crimson flowers. She had white sandals in her feet. Her hair was long and fell over her shoulders in two black cascades. Through her clothes, you could see the curves and semi-circles of her young body. She looked like a fresco in a cave which time had left unsoiled. She was like a fairy queen who lived in the blue skies and who had come down to earth for a few moments because there was unhappiness and suffering here.

When she had gone back upstairs, he said to Apa Atti: "Apa, who is this girl ? I have never seen her before."

"Of course, you have," she replied. "She came to the house with me yesterday ; you were there. She lives in Gujranwala. She is the daughter of my best friend. She will stay a few days here."

He fell into deep thought. He couldn't believe his eyes. He couldn't believe that this was the girl he had seen yesterday and had failed to notice her beauty. He thought of her voice again. It had the freshness of early morning in it. Her words were like flowers which spread all over when she spoke. He wanted to pick up these flowers and touch them with his lips and eyes. He wanted to put them into the depths of his soul where they would always remain young and fragrant. For a long time he kept thinking of her. And, it was as if a screen had been lifted from in front of his eyes. He saw his old grandfather dozing on a bed ; and his sister Zeb sitting on the mat trying to memorise her English lesson ; and his mother, his poor, suffering mother, at the spinning wheel. The room was full of the drome of the spinning wheel, like a thousand flies

humming together. He could hear Chaudhri Nawab Din shouting. And he saw the book-shelf lined with books, like animals in cages. And then he saw the girl. A thin, pale girl in a crimson shirt, sitting next to his mother, talking to her in whispers, looking with vacant eyes at the pictures on the walls. He had tried to look at her, but he hadn't been able to see her. Her beauty had veiled itself from his eyes. But now the veil had been lifted. He had recognized her. He had gone across the chasm.

Man is a mean animal. Do not give him to eat for a day and all his art and philosophy and knowledge evaporates like so much steam. All his aesthetics, all his gods, all his systems fall down. A thick curtain gets drawn up between him and life. "Truly God is great. Truly God is great." He could hear the *muazzin's* call from the mosque next door. He smiled and lit a cigarette.

Translated from the original Urdu by KHALID HASSAN

THE QUILT

SHAUKAT OSMAN

Latif crouched and puffed at his *hookah*. He coughed a little and looked up at his wife Baru Bibi.

"I have got to go to the city tomorrow, Baru Bibi."

"What for ?"

"To buy potato seeds."

"I see."

"You better sleep with Manu tomorrow."

Manu was their young son. It was quite some time that the son had fallen asleep in his bed in one corner of the floor. The husband and wife looked at the quietly sleeping boy. There was no quilt over his body ; instead, there was the bag used for crops. It kept the cold away for him.

"You want that bag, don't you ?"

"Yes."

There was a huge quilt lying clumsily gathered in the far corner of the mat at the foot of the bed.

Baru Bibi looked askance at that : "You want us to sleep under that ?"

"Yes. Can't help. Wrap that about you and sleep."

Latif puffed at his *hookah* and nodding again said : "Yes, inside that. It is a matter of one night only, Baru Bibi, and I can't help it. Lie under it with Manu just for one night."

Manu could easily sleep with his mother. That was all right. The trouble was about the quilt. Last year, during the rains, Latif's father Khadem had died of tuberculosis. The

built ought to have been thrown away then. But it couldn't be done. Latif's father had lost the other quilt they had, when he had gone to sleep in the portico of the Munshis. They had only two rooms side by side and the old man found it difficult to move about freely. That was why he never used to sleep in the room. The present quilt also belonged to him. Probably Latif's father had got it from his fore-fathers as a heirloom. The quilt would certainly weigh no less than twenty pounds at least. It was impossible to tell how many dozens of old tattered clothes had gone in its making.

Baru Bibi had named the quilt 'Earth-crusher' in disgust and annoyance.

Manu formerly used to sleep with them, but the father did not like the idea of his son's sleeping under a quilt that had once belonged to a consumptive. And so Manu was given a different bed and a separate quilt, that is, that crop-bag, thick and heavy.

Baru Bibi had begged for old discarded clothes from many of her neighbours in order to make a quilt for her son, but who, in this poor village, could waste even a slightly tattered old cloth ? The need of each was equally great.

"Lie under that quilt?" Baru Bibi asked again.

"Can't be helped, Baru Bibi," said Latif. "Damn it, what evil days are these," said Baru Bibi.

"Well, you tell me. Can I fetch half a maund of seeds in my towel ?"

Baru Bibi nodded her head sideways : no, that was clearly not possible. Latif too was not feeling quite easy in his mind. In his family, the general physique being quite sound and tough, none suffered very much, at least in one's youth. It was no use reckoning what would happen when one grew old. But it would be tragic if Manu were attacked with this vile disease in his tender age. Latif prayed in his heart : "Keep my child hale and hearty, O Allah."

He did not allow Manu to go near his father. Tuberculosis was a terribly infectious disease. Latif's father Khadem could hardly take this in good grace. He used to speak ill of his son and daughter-in-law for this precaution of theirs.

But Khadem feared his son alright. After calling his son all sorts of names in presence of the neighbours, he would

entreat them earnestly not to repeat his words to Latif. Latif, however, was a perfectly respectful son. But the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law lived miles apart. And they also quarrelled occasionally.

Latif continued to puff at his *hookah* and said : "Look at my stars. I have only one son and I can't get even one quilt for him."

"Why blame your stars ? Blame your stupidity, if you like," said Baru Bibi, and added : "Not yours but your father's."

"What do you mean ?" Latif grew somewhat angry, and countered: "You are very intelligent, aren't you?"

"Oh, leave it. No use quarrelling. Is there? When one gets old, one is apt to be stupid. He lost the other quilt and so our son is now spending his nights without anything to cover his naked body."

Latif, tired after the day's work in the fields, did not like to answer back to this. But Baru Bibi went on: "Your father caused a lot of trouble."

"How ? Trouble to whom ?"

"Ghosts ! Understand, *janab*, to ghosts."

Latif was fuming inside. Still he spoke quietly : "How can you appreciate our father ? Did you ever see him in his youth ? Who the devil could ever dare to pick up a quarrel with the Talukdar except father ?"

Khadem Ali was really an audacious fellow in his young days. He had quarrelled with the Talukdar and had been in jail twice. But in his old age, the once ferocious fellow had turned into a tame creature and the red-hot fury of the earlier years was gone.

"Let go of the old tales."

"You call them tales, do you ? Ask any of the villagers and you will know." Latif found a queer taste of joy and pride in the stories of his father's heroic exploits, but for Baru Bibi the reaction was entirely different.

Manu turned on his side in his sleep and the bag slipped off exposing his naked body. Both husband and wife saw this, but none advanced to cover him up.

"Your father was a Nawab, otherwise why are we in this condition today ?"

"Allah has brought us to this condition."

"O God !" Baru Bibi exclaimed in bitter irony and added, "don't I know ? Nice person indeed ! Does a nice person quarrel with his daughter-in-law ?"

Latif roared angrily : "Shut your trap, you bitch. I will beat you to an inch of your life, if you don't shut up."

Latif could not tolerate any insult to his father, particularly so when that father was no more on this earth.

"How dare you ? Alright, come on, we'll see," Baru Bibi retorted angrily. At this invitation to duel, Latif stepped back with a start, but his shouts did not stop.

"You dirty bitch, how would you know my father ? The people of ten villages around knew him. Ask Talukdar, and he would tell you what sort of a man my father was."

"How fiery, eh ? As if he did not use to suffocate with hacking coughs with his face on the earth !"

Baru Bibi made a mock demonstration.

"Oh, shut up ! Mock my father's ability or intelligence again, and I shall beat you to death."

"Your father's intelligence indeed ! The king of fools speaking of intelligence !"

Latif swallowed his anger. He knew how Baru Bibi really felt. Didn't she look after his father any the less patiently during the old man's last days ? Far from neglecting the father-in-law, the daughter-in-law had worked as a sweepress to him. Still she did not like him. After a month of her marriage, she had taken charge of the house-hold. Her mother-in-law was already dead. Between the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law no intimate relationship existed. And yet Baru Bibi never hesitated to work hard for the old man.

"How do you speak of intelligence ? One does not lose a quilt if he is intelligent. Look at the child's condition today," said Baru Bibi. Latif found himself in a tight hole in this war of words. The pitiable condition of his son in no way enhanced his glory. So with an eye to his own parenthood, he found it advisable to keep quiet, though his father's prestige was being damaged in his very presence.

He pulled the dirty quilt towards him. A musty odour emanated from it. He smelled it once and made a face in disgust.

"Why don't you spread it in the sun ?" he asked his

wife.

"I do !"

Latif wrapped the quilt about him and lay down. Baru Bibi mumbled to herself for some time and ensured that her son was settled alright. She touched the mat underneath. Sometimes kids wet their bed and went on sleeping on it. Manu got a bad cold in this way, a fortnight ago. No, it was alright tonight.

Baru Bibi extinguished the lamp.

A few days after his return from the city, Latif one day noticed that Manu had a slight temperature. He had developed a cold and was coughing a little.

Latif asked : "Any pain in the chest, son ?"

"No !"

Reassured, Latif took Manu up in his arms. It was rather untimely, and still Manu wanted to lie in bed. But Latif did not listen to his protests.

Father and son started talking.

"Manu, dear, your grand-dad was an audacious man."

"Really, father ?"

"Yes ! When there was total crop failure that year, do you know it was he who had said 'we won't pay any rent this year'."

Manu pricked his ears to hear the story of his grandfather's adventures.

'We won't pay any rent !' All the village over, there was only one talk. No payment of rent ! Talukdar called him and enquired: 'Well, won't you pay your rent?'

'No *Huzzur* ?'

'Why ?'

"My father said : 'There is no why about it. How can we pay rent ? We have even sold off our plates and cups and are now eating off earthen bowls !' You know, I was only a kid then. Still I remember everything clearly."

"Talukdar said : 'Flood has destroyed your crops, that is as Allah has willed. Why won't you pay your rent on that account ?'

'But how can we, and where from ?' answered my father.

'Alright. I shall see,' Talukdar threatened.

"The police came to the village but could not find any trace of my father. They asked me: 'Where is your father,

boy ?'

"I said: 'I don't know, *Huzzur*.'

"You know, the whole village was in a turmoil. My father used to come to us in the night. One evening he fell just in front of two constables. When they seized him, he pleaded: 'Forgive me, *saheb*. If I go to jail my family will simply starve to death.' The constables shouted back, 'Come to the Police Station!' There were two sepoys on either side of him. After they had advanced a little, father suddenly grabbed each of them under his arms and ran. The constables, caught thus in his arm-pits, began screaming."

Latif grinned happily. Manu was listening soberly, without a word.

"The constables' turbans and batons were later found in a ditch," Latif added.

"Father, what happened to grand-pa ?"

"Imprisonment, dear. But what does it matter ? He was a real hero."

"Grandfather was hunch-backed and he used to cough a lot," said Manu.

"Well, everyone gets like that in his old age, son."

"Father !"

"There are other episodes, too, son."

Just then Baru Bibi entered the room.

Manu called out : "Come, mother, listen to this story."

"Story !" Baru Bibi asked in surprise.

"Yes, mother, grandfather's story !"

Baru Bibi grew awfully angry.

"There is nothing to do, eh ? And so you have started talking about your old father's heroism again. Pooh !" she angrily said.

Latif's enthusiasm vanished in a second. He sat tongue-tied. Baru Bibi said jeeringly : "Are you aware that Manu has a temperature ? Call in a doctor."

Latif's head sank further on his knees.

"Manu was with your father. God knows what is in store for us," she said.

"I shall ask *Moulvi saheb* to give us some sacred water tomorrow," Latif replied meekly.

"Sacred water indeed, since it does not cost anything ! It is good for nothing, I tell you."

Manu was quietly enjoying his parents' quarrel.

"Always talking about father ! My father did this, my father did that ! Did he have ten acres of land, I say ?"

"Shut up Baru Bibi, else it will fare ill with you."

Baru Bibi stamped off to the kitchen, leaving a current of venomous words behind.

"Like father like son. Stupid ! Each and all terribly stupid ! You pride yourselves on being heroes and you can't even give a piece of cloth to your wife."

Latif became dumb in front of this indictment and suffered the indignity in silence.

There was something more.

About ten or twelve days later Latif, after his mid-day's work in the fields, came to his room and found Baru Bibi sitting quietly with the quilt wrapped about her. One corner of her wet *sari* was tied to the rack and another corner was held by Baru Bibi. Baru Bibi was slowly swinging the corner in her hand so that the wind could help the *sari* dry up quickly.

"Why don't you get up ? Got a fever, eh ?"

"It is quite pleasant for you if I am in bed with fever, is that so ?"

From the tone and the voice Latif guessed that whatever it was, it was most certainly no case of fever.

Latif said : "Why are you sitting quietly ? Shan't I take my meals ?"

"Can't get up now. You go and eat," Baru Bibi replied shortly.

"Baru Bibi, I am awfully hungry."

"Can't you see that I am busy," Baru Bibi began swinging the corner of her *sari* more vigorously.

"Get up, dear!"

"No, I can't !"

Suddenly Latif pulled at the quilt in a gesture of playful pleading and discovered with a shock that Baru Bibi was stark naked. More embarrassed than the naked wife, Latif threw the quilt at her quickly and tried to joke. "There is nothing in this, dear, you are still a baby."

Baru Bibi said : "Go outside, please. There has been enough of love-making for old people."

Her voice sounded harsh and rude. She had fever more than once for keeping a wet *sari* on. So she had to be cautious

now. It was only she who, by her physical labour, kept things going on somehow.

"Shameless ! The wife has no cloth to put on and you call youself a man," muttered Baru Bibi. Latif quietly slipped out. It was already night when their mid-day meal was partaken of that day.

Winter was almost at an end. Not infrequent had been the sudden gusts of the southern wind. Latif was not at home for a few days. He had gone to another village. When he came back and entered his room at noon, he noticed that Baru Bibi, with a red *sari* on, was sewing another quilt. Without wasting his breath on greetings and things like that, Latif asked straight away : "Where did you get that *sari* ?"

There was an army camp in the out-skirts of the village. Thanks to that, the poverty-stricken village girls occasionally got presents of *saris*. Quick as lightning, misery engulfed him.

Baru Bibi replied : "I got it !"

"Where from ?"

"Manu's father has given me the *sari*."

"Me !"

Latif did not yet lose his temper.

"I have given you the *sari* ! where was I ?"

"Didn't you come at night ?"

"I or your lover ?"

Baru Bibi was still quiet. Smilingly she replied :

"Quite possible ! What's the harm ?"

"No joking. Speak up, where did you get the *sari* ?"

"Didn't I say Manu's father has given it to me ?"

"Manu's father ?"

Latif's jaw grew square and hard. Baru Bibi was quietly looking at the quilt.

"Manu's father or the son of a bitch of a military sepoy ! You. . . ." roared Latif.

Baru Bibi interrupted: "Nice looking, handsome fellow."

"What the devil !" Latif grew furious. His face darkened in savage anger. Baru Bibi felt that the matter should not be allowed to go further.

She said : "Sit down, mister, and be calm. I said that Manu's father gave me the *sari*. Well, it was not Manu's father, but your father."

"My father ?"

"Yes."

"My father ?" Latif gritted his teeth and watched her.

She said : "Sit down, mister. Yes, your father, honestly."

But Latif was not prepared to sit down before he had got a suitable answer.

Baru Bibi pointed her finger to the folded quilt and said: "See that ?"

"What shall I see there ?"

"Well, listen now. I opened up that quilt of father. Your father's."

"Well, what of that ? Where did you get the *sari* ?" Latif stuck to his point.

"Calm down, mister. I am coming to that," and then Baru Bibi explained the whole matter. Some years back people used to make a quilt with many old, but none-too-soft clothes, sewn together fold by fold. In the present times men do not even get the bare minimum of cloth for their daily wear, so it is out of the question now. Baru Bibi got the *sari* in the old quilt. She had unsewn and opened up the quilt in search of old clothes, if any, that could be used.

Quietened, Latif looked at the pile of the discarded quilt and said : "Can't we get another *sari* in that ?"

Baru Bibi replied in the negative. "No, I searched the whole thing. You know, where would I get a *sari* ? Thanks to the father-in-law that today I have got one."

Baru Bibi went on sewing and mumbling too.

"I had only one *sari* and now I have two. Today, I won't have to stay with a wet *sari* on. Nice, isn't it ?" Baru Bibi smiled complacently. She added: "How many pieces of half-tattered rotten clothes were sewn inside the quilt ! Your father did that. And today we can't even get a tattered piece to put on. Thanks to your father...."

"Yes," Latif sat down on the mat with a happy bright face and added, "so you see now, and yet you used to call my father stupid." Latif seemed to be enjoying a huge joke and was going to burst out in laughter. But the other party was quiet. Latif looked up at Baru Bibi and saw that there were tears in her eyes. She was sniffing with head bent and continued with her sewing.

"What's the matter, Baru Bibi ?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me, please. What is the matter, dear ?"

"I had opened up the old quilt for Manu, so that I could make a small nice one for him. But I found this *sari* and it was fairly tough and so I took it for myself instead. We have only one son, and he has to spend his nights with the crop-bag on his body. Do you call me a mother ?"

"Don't weep, Baru Bibi. Allah will give us better days."

Baru Bibi flew into a rage even amidst her tears.

"Didn't I call your father a stupid person ? He also used to say exactly this. You are his son, aren't you ? And what else can you be ? Stupid, one and all !"

Like a deflated balloon, Latif quietly sat down and began digging at the earth with his toe-nails.

Translated from the original Bengali by KABIR CHOWDHURY

THE FROZEN SPARK

MUMTAZ MUFTI

Whenever I think of my sister Sajjada, I am reminded of an oil lamp, burning with a dim beauty of its own. My memory takes me to the night when she, mother, and myself were sitting in the parlour near the fireplace, and Buddoo, then seven years old, said to mother, rather confidentially: "Mother, I want to get married."

"Not just now," mother said with a smile, and then added, "how if we married you to your Apa Sajjada."

"Oh, no!" Buddoo said.

"But what is wrong with your sister ?" mother enquired.

"Oh nothing ? But I prefer to marry Apa Salma," he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Mother smiled again, pointed towards sister, and remarked: "But see how nice your sister is !"

"I will tell you what she is like," Buddoo gently said, and then gazed with wide-open eyes around the room, as if trying to find something. He ended his search at the fireplace, and pointing towards a burnt out coal, said: "She is like this." Then switched his gaze to the glowing electric bulb and said: "Apa Salma is like that."

And just then our cousin Tasadduq came in, and mother said: "Tasadduq, would you ask Buddoo what he thinks of his sister ?"

Sister, of course, was by then busily engaged in knitting a sweater.

"Well, tell us what your sister is like," Tasadduq asked

in good humour.

"Indeed I will tell you," yelled Buddoo, and he was about to pick up an apparently burnt out piece of coal, when sister pulled back his hand. Buddoo was annoyed at this interference, and was going to cry, when mother explained to him that this coal, though covered with burnt out ash, had fire within it which could have burnt his hands. Buddoo could not believe that what looked like ash could have fire, so he innocently asked sister: "Is there really enough spark in it to cause a flame ?"

"How should I know ?" she answered, but the colour of her face had become a bright red, like that of a ripe apple.

Now I realise that sister lived in the depths of her heart, which were so dark and so unfathomable that even if some emotions were struggling to be observed, they just could not reach the surface. Her emotions were as dangerously hidden as the spark of fire in an ash-covered piece of coal, and Buddoo in his innocence had spoken a deep truth.

Somehow, I always thought of sister as an inert, lifeless object; though the truth was that she was the most hard-worked member of the family. How often it happened that Buddoo would be shouting for his glass of milk, father for his *hookah*, and mother for the laundry book—all at the same time. Sister would do all this work with thorough agility. And yet, God knows why, I, her younger sister, thought of her as a silent, motionless being. I never heard her laugh or giggle. All she did was to smile. When she smiled, her lips would part a little, her eyes would dim as if under the stress of some half forgotten emotion, and her face became radiant with an unknown joy. It was almost as if a pleasant symphony was played in the moonlight by a sparkling brook in the hills. Ah, yes the fascination of symphonies, wild brooks and moonlight ! But of the time I write, I knew little about this fascination. All I was sure of was that sister never stirred, and that she somehow moved from one place to another by magic. She was so shy, gentle, and silent.

Sarah, our neighbour, was altogether different. She always seemed to be active, moving, and dynamic. She personified the beat of those enchanting Oriental dances, where each step is a thousand emotions. And our cousin-sister Sajjoo ! Heavens ! When moving with her perfect

coquettish poise, she turned her head a little to shout for one, smiling through her big black eyes, she looked passion itself. Oh, how I liked to be with her for hours together !

Sarah's house was always resounding with laughter, just like the ringing of temple bells, continuous and so melodious. If I could, I'd have gone and lived in that house, for in our house there was hardly any activity. There was an inert, colourless sister, a *hookah*-puffing father, and a do-this do-that mother.

Sarah's house had a vivacity and charm not lost to my parents.

One night I heard father say to mother: "It looks as if there are a lot of jingling plates in Sarah's house."

"What makes you say this?" mother asked.

"Well, it sounds like a continuous fair in that house, always roars of laughter. You see, when in a family a young girl blossoms into youth, it does sound like the jingling of plates; and every one in the street comes to know of it. In fact, everyone comments about such a youthful girl in the family. But look at Sajjada ! How quiet and gentle she is."

When I overheard this, my face flushed in indignation. Quiet and gentle ! Bah ! I just wanted to go to Apa, make faces at her and tell her how dull and insipid she was. After all, what did father know about life? He puffed his *hookah*, and read law books ! Our house was dull ! Dull ! The only mercy was that Tasadduq, who studied at college, but lived with us, sometimes joined us and enlivened the house. He was the one person in the family who could talk about interesting things, and sing nice songs. And whenever he sang, Apa always smiled a little, the same deep entrancing smile. Not unoften she would slap Buddoo affectionately, saying: "Why don't you cry, eh ?"

On week ends, Tasadduq spent quite some time gossiping with Buddoo and myself. His conversation was so interesting that we could keep on listening to him for hours. He seldom talked with Apa. When he did, her *dupatta*, often casually thrown over the head and shoulders, would cover her long tresses, and very nearly covered part of her face with it. Her eyes would dim, and she'd pretend to be busily occupied with some domestic chore. Then poor Tasadduq would try to find ways of talking about sister to Buddoo, and through him to her. But Buddoo always made such attempts futile, by his childish

exuberance, for he would shout: "I don't know what she is doing" or "Shall I call her? What do you want to know?" Then Buddoo would start thumping the table, so that mother would have to ask if anything was wrong.

But Apa would always over-hear this, and all she would do was smile, although sometimes her *dupatta* would slip completely off her head, her hair fall on her face, and her eyes, in their haziness, would seem to dance about like the sparkling flames in the fireplace, while her lips formed unspoken words. It would look as if she were in a trance. Then the sound of the footsteps of father or mother would instantaneously recall her to her usual serene self.

One evening, as we were sitting out on the lawn, we overheard Tasadduq and Buddoo talking as if they were engaged in some serious discussion. Tasadduq was saying to Buddoo: "Young friend, I should like to marry a girl who could speak to me in English, read nice books, play chess, carrom and badminton, and most of all who could cook good food for me."

Buddoo replied: "Ah! But I want to marry sister Salma."

"Oh, what a shame!" Tasadduq answered with good humoured irony.

"Oh, I know whom you want to marry," Buddoo said. "You want to get married to Apa."

At that moment mother smiled, and looked towards sister. But she was so busy cleaning her nails that she apparently had not heard the conversation.

Then we heard Tasadduq saying: "Oh, but your Apa doesn't know how to make pudding. Look how little sugar she puts in it. It is so tasteless!"

Buddoo replied: "Why, that is because father says that pudding shouldn't have too much sugar."

Their talk did not end there, for they went on to talk about films, records, wrestlers and other things, and all of us sitting in the lawn just burst out laughing when the two of them tried to sing a song together. Sister also smiled, and went away to the kitchen.

Not long after this, as I was busy doing my school work, and sister was busy with her knitting, Tasadduq walked in and asked me casually: "Have you ever heard of George Bernard Shaw?"

"No," I said.

Then, looking towards sister's long flowing hair Tasadduq said, "I'm sure your sister must have read 'Heartbreak House'."

Sister just nodded, and said faintly: "No," remaining busy all the time with her knitting.

Then he said to me: "I really do not know why your sister gave up studies after high school."

"How on earth should I know ?" I replied. Though, of course, I knew all the time why sister had not wanted to go on to college. She felt that in college, girls went really to display their clothes, jewellery, and cosmetics, rather than study. But I had never agreed with this. The real truth was that she herself did not want to go to college, or rather wanted to stay at home all day, and, therefore, made up all these excuses about the improper atmosphere in college.

One evening father almost lost his temper, for there was too much sugar in the pudding. But, unlike other occasions when father's angry face in itself was enough to shake poor sister, this time her eyes seemed to float about, and her cheeks flushed with pleasure.

"I don't know why there should be so much sugar today," she muttered slowly, and went away. But father kept on fuming. "I have been noticing for the last five days this excessive use of sugar in the pudding ! Why, has it gone so cheap?"

But then mother came running in and silenced father by saying: "Don't you know there is a grown-up nephew in the house ?"

Sister and our neighbour Sarah could never get along together, and the fault was sister's. She always tried to cut short any attempt made by Sarah to engage her in conversation. On one occasion alone did she become friendly with her, and that was to borrow a copy of 'Heartbreak House'. Sister always hid the book in her drawer and would read it late at night, when most of us were ready for sleep. But I knew this all along. So, one day, I pretended to be asleep, and then, when sister was reading the book, I sat up and asked innocently: "Apa, what does this 'Heartbreak House' mean, anyway ? Does it mean a broken heart, or a broken house ?"

Sister was stunned, and preferred not to answer. I got fed up with her silence and, losing my temper, said: "I think

our home is a broken house too."

"How should I know ?" she said.

"Oh, yes, how could my Apa know ?" I answered, rather curtly. She kept quiet, but I could see that she was immeasurably hurt.

One afternoon Tasadduq asked me casually: "Tell me, can your sister make fruit salad ?"

"You can ask her yourself. Why should I know anything about it ?" I replied, rudely.

"Aha," he said good humouredly, "you seem to have been fighting with someone."

"Why should I fight ? Am I a boy to keep on fighting ?"

He started laughing and said: "But I like fighting. I would love to marry a girl who'd fight with me every morning and evening, and still not get tired of fighting, and still love me."

I just blushed and changed the subject by asking: "What is a fruit salad, anyway ?"

But sister had overheard this, for soon after that she got hold of a cookery-book, and learned to make fruit salad. One evening she had made fruit salad and had hidden it in a drawer, to be served for dinner. I went and told Tasadduq about it. He and Buddoo conspired to steal it and steal it they did. When sister came to know of this, she stared at me in a way she had never done before, and went to bed earlier than usual. She wept bitterly all night, and I was so ashamed of myself that I wished to go and kiss her feet in apology. But I could not bring myself to do anything of the sort, and just lay reading a book.

About this time a friend of the family came to stay with us. She was sitting for her high school examination. Her coming to our house was a great occasion, and for once the house was full of mirth and laughter, so that even Salma would come from her house to spend the day and late evenings with us. Buddoo was very happy, and would say not infrequently: "Ah, I am going to marry Apa Salma."

Salma would slap him on the head and ask: "Have you ever seen yourself in a mirror ?" Then she would turn her big black eyes towards Tasadduq. There was a world of difference in the way sister and Salma would behave towards Tasadduq. Sister was so cold and prosaic that she hardly

seemed to have any life in her, whereas Salma was vibrant and gay in the company of Tasadduq, almost like a dancing butterfly in high spring.

The truth remained that the coming of Sajjoo (for that was her name) to our house was like the introduction of a new, vibrant note into an otherwise dull musical performance. Our poor sister, already so seemingly inert, became all the more so, and Buddoo gave up playing with Tasadduq and instead played with Sajjoo. In fact, he was always with her.

One night Tasadduq and all of us were sitting in the parlour just before dinner. Sister sat calm and silent near the fireplace, and Buddoo sat giggling aimlessly with Salma. Then, all of a sudden, Salma rose from her seat, went to the almirah, and brought a dish of fruit salad. Before any one could say a word, she said, smiling through her shining eyes: "This is for you, Tasadduq. At least you'll remember that Salma made one dish for you."

Tasadduq gulped a few spoonfuls, and then remarked, "Heavens ! It is delicious ! Who made it ?"

"I did, of course," answered Salma.

Buddoo was about to shout: "Shall I tell you who really made it ?" when sister placed her hand on Buddoo's mouth and forcibly took him out of the room. The poor boy could say nothing. I myself felt that some irresistable force was drawing me out of the room, and out I came. Sister stood looking across the terrace, and from within the room came the sound of muffled conversation, and then the voice of Salma, saying deliriously : "Leave me alone ! Let me go !"

The next day we were all sitting on the lawn, when we heard Tasadduq and Salma discuss something in Tasadduq's room. Suddenly, there came the sound of running footsteps, and noises suggestive of a sort of hand-to-hand fight. Then Buddoo came out running with the news that Salma and Tasadduq were fighting with each other, and he very nearly dragged sister to the scene. Sister had gone pale, and she stood watching them, as if lost in some deep emotion or thought. Buddoo wanted to run and tell mother about it, but sister caught hold of him, and promised to give him sweets if he would not talk about the incident between Salma and Tasadduq.

That evening I saw 'Heartbreak House' in sister's al-

marah. She had finished the book. In the kitchen sink the fruit salad bowl lay broken in a hundred pieces.

* * * *

It was not till two years after the marriage of Salma and Tasadduq that we went to call on them for the first time. By that time, of course, Salma was no longer the girl we used to know. She no longer had her laughter, her jokes, her fascinating eyes. Her face had gone pale, her forehead was wrinkled, and she and Tasadduq sat silent all the time. Sitting by the fireplace, Tasadduq asked Buddoo with a nervous smile. "Would you like to marry your Apa Salma ?"

"Oh no," he replied, "I will not marry at all now." Salma left the room to bring in some refreshments.

Then I reminded Buddoo of the occasion when he thought that Salma was like an electric bulb, so bright and shining; and sister like an ash-covered coal, which always has a spark of flame in it. Tasadduq's face turned pale at this. "Yes," he sighed, "like the electric bulb." And at that very moment the lights went off, and the bright bulb became dark and obscure.

Tasadduq could only say: "God alone knows what is wrong with that bulb. Sometimes it is bright, sometimes it is dark ! On and off !"

Sister sat all the time silently toying with the coals in the fireplace once in a while. At last Tasadduq said rather sadly : "God, how cold it is," and moved closer to the fireplace. Then, with a sigh, he added: "Auntie was right when she said that sparks can be found in these seemingly ash-covered burnt out coals."

Sister moved a little, and there was a faint, hissing sound, as if some drops of water had fallen on the burning coal. I am sure they were the tears of sister. Tasadduq could only say, apologetically, humbly, almost inaudibly. "For God's sake, do not extinguish the burning spark in the coal. See how cold it is outside !"

Translated from the original by NASIR AHMAD FAROOKI and KHALID HASAN

THE TABLE WAS LAID

ABU RUSHD

God had shown Munim the utmost bounty. His sceptical friends, of course, scoffed at the idea and discovered an earthly source for the bounty : Munim's redoubtable father-in-law. A thought clearly prompted by envy! For Munim had fallen in love with the daughter of his father-in-law and the latter was completely out of the picture.

Quite right, Munim's friends would say, but consider the wisdom of the choice. At first, in fact, Rashida's doe-like eyes had been ample inducement. Affluence had then seemed inconsequential in the warmth of youth's awakening. Owning a nice little cottage was the dream.

Rashida had other ideas. Her father was an impressively big official and gold and silver were common sights in their household. When suddenly it was love and the boy turned out to be an inferior employee, how to raise him in the social level became her uppermost concern.

Where there is a will there is a way. Her father's world was the world of the Establishment. So, Munim got the little fringe benefits of lordly condescension. And before Rashida dwindled into a housewife, she had the pleasure ofseeing Munim taking a climb or two up the social ladder.

As fortune smiled on Munim, his body prospered and his face became bloom-flesh and fat living in joyous co-existence. When he sometimes showed up in obtrusively neat and expensive clothes in his father-in-law's loudly decorated drawing room, the assembled lords and barons beamed their approval

on him. On their wedding night gifts of gold and silver poured in. Not that after the breathless excitement of the ceremony Rashida had not noticed at midnight the glittering splendour of the moon above the *neem* tree, or Munim was not freshly surprised at the innocent eyes of his bride softly clad in a blue *sari* of Benarsi silk.

Saris came in profusion after the wedding and the couple were delighted. The construction of the house took a little time as the couple were divided on what should get priority : a car or a house. After an animated and searching debate, they eventually agreed that the house was a greater necessity. When the magic combination of permits and a well-paid job and the influence of Munim's father-in-law had brought the expectation within realisation, a slight hitch occurred. A letter arrived from Shahed Ali, a very close friend of Munim from his college days.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the two friends had, in the bravado of adolescence, embarked on daring ventures. Once, on a wager, they had spent hour after hour in the red light district nobly resolved to detect a teacher paying his respects to a lady of the evening. And the detection was made. Munim had timidly asked his friend, on that memorable occasion, how they would explain their presence in the prohibited area should the teacher call for an explanation the next day. Cool and composed Shahed had said : "Don't bother. He won't. If he does, we can put the same question to him."

On another occasion, Munim recalled, they had visited an expensive restaurant in a rare exuberance of spirits and caught the eye—with the depth of the blue ocean in it—of a foreign damsel. She had immediately turned all her charms on the two wide-eyed beholders who had each believed that the damsel's lasciviousness was specially meant for him. Munim had jokingly observed : "Look, Shahed, how greedily she surveys you." Shahed had paid back the compliment: "She is surveying all right, but not me. It is the person next to me."

But how distant those days now seemed in this world of lords and barons, of gems and ornaments, and of numberless *saris*. The weight of twenty-seven springs now lay gratefully buried amid the comforts of life.

Shahed had asked for a loan. His wife lay seriously ill

and all his savings were exhausted, so a loan of five hundred rupees would be most helpful. What an uncouth proposal—Munim thought in the sure assurance of his new affluence. In the social environment with which he was now familiar, a wife's illness was no problem at all.

Munim immediately sat in conference with his wife and after cautious deliberations the decision was arrived at that Munim should write to his friend telling him that in view of the construction of a house, which they had undertaken, Munim was not in a position to advance any loan to his friend although they were genuinely sorry to know about his difficulty and they would be pleased to entertain Shahed and his wife for a few days in their house after the latter had made a complete recovery.

Nevertheless, Munim was not able to dismiss the thought of his friend from his mind and the image of his friend's wife continued to disturb him even when he was engaged in a shrewd transaction regarding logs in the bungalow of the Divisional Forest Officer. A smiling face, and a body which had a willowy grace about it. When Munim had been first introduced to his friend's wife, he had immediately come under her spell. The possibility of delights which Munim had discovered in the delicately sweet and lissom looks of Shahed's wife was not to be found anywhere in Rashida, no matter how limpidly lovely her eyes. Why had this thought at all arisen in his mind, Munim would not be able to explain now, but the sense of loss was there all the same—like a stinging retort of fate. Shahed had then appeared as the victor. Why and how were questions Munim was powerless to answer.

The deal over, Munim returned to his house and Rashida. After many a week, he closely explored the looks of his wife. Rashida looked every nerve and muscle a contented housewife, with the last trace of delicacy gone. What had been his dream-girl ? A ready conversationalist, slightly coquettish, good at bridge, exploding into uncivilized laughter, speaking English with a confidence not matched by her grammar, a housewife proudly conscious of her affluence, or something else ? Rashida felt uncomfortable and a little slighted under the searching glance of her husband : Why this critical assessment ?

But when in the afternoon the call for bridge came from the Additional Superintendent of Police, Munim was careful to see that Rashida dressed appropriately for the occasion and was not satisfied till her *sari*, blouse, and sandal all blended into a neat harmony.

One day the house was completed. And it looked so elegant that Rashida was momentarily caught in two minds and could not decide whether the house or her husband was the more important thing. A corresponding thought also arose in the mind of Munim : Was the house more indispensable now ! Or Rashida ! And both simultaneously thought : Would the birth of a son be a more stirring joy ?

Now, perhaps, with the house completed without any complication of loans and with a fairly large accumulation of *saris*, a child would not be so inappropriate, Rashida felt. The house would not then look so empty and the husband so uncertain. Munim was becoming a threat to her, Rashida realized with her womanly intuition, as he had begun to explore her deficiencies in his moments of leisure. Even this house, on which she had spent so much labour, seemed to have somewhere developed a crack already, a rust beyond correction.

Some months later, when Rashida had just become pregnant, Munim was both surprised and embarrassed to see Shahed and his wife at the place of the Town Rationing Officer, where he had unsuspectingly gone to attend a party. Shahed told him that he had come to town on transfer as a Sub Deputy Magistrate and they were staying with the Town Rationing Officer, a friend, who had generously set apart a room for them. Munim said : "You know I am here and yet you didn't drop me a line."

Shahed replied in a civil tone : "We came in a hurry and had no time to send a message."

"But you might have come straight to our place. Forgotten your friend completely, eh ?"

Shahed gave a smile, a compound of sweetness and ridicule : "Forget a friend ? Can a friend ever be forgotten ?"

Quickly, Munim stole a glance at his friend's wife. No sign of her recent serious illness. The willowy grace was still very much there and so also the quivering rhythm of her

body. Was her illness a fact or a convenient invention for asking a loan ?

Rashida had noticed with her quick eye her husband's silent indiscretion and she felt suddenly completely insecure. The newly built house, the colourful assemblage of expensive and beautiful *saris*, the imminent acquisition of a car; were these the things she had wished for or the comforting presence of a loving mind ? She was ordinarily incapable of any subtle interludes of grief, but looking at the wife of a poor Sub Deputy Magistrate, so obviously her inferior in the matter of dress and ornaments, Rashida uneasily became aware that she was soundly beaten at a vital point in the complex game of life. As it was socially incorrect to be engrossed in the contemplation of a particular couple, Munim had to move about among the other guests, although he longed to make a further exploration of his friend's wife. For the same reason, Rashida was also not able to keep her husband under constant watch.

When the party was over Munim told Shahed : "Come and dine with us next Sunday." Then, turning all his charms on Shahed's wife, he said with a wink that was meant to be familiar : "You are also coming, aren't you ?"

She smiled sweetly : "If your friend takes me to your place, I will gladly come." Meanwhile Rashida had edged her way towards them and addressing both husband and wife said in a tone honeyed with friendliness : "Why don't you come and stay with us until you find a house ?" Then looking up at her husband she added in beautifully managed innocence : "Any objection ?"

Munim quickly controlled himself : "No objection at all, it will be a pleasure." Shahed politely declined the offer : "We can't move now, my friend will be offended. Thank you, all the same."

But Rashida was not to be daunted. Although conscious of the change in her body wrought by imminent motherhood, she, in a moment of subtle inspiration, decided to try the magic of her doe-like eyes on her husband's friend : "My husband is also your friend. Why can't you then stay with him ? Your present host will not mind, I am sure." Then Rashida extended her hand a bit in a gesture of supreme intimacy towards Shahed's wife and said in a coaxing voice : "Do come."

Shahed's wife smiled in a tauntingly uncommitted manner.

On taking leave Munim told Shahed : "On Sunday I will send a car for you at seven. That's fixed, remember."

To his friend's wife he said : "You must also come. It's a promise now."

Her husband's last words gave Rashida a fresh wring in the heart.

On the way back home, riding in a borrowed jeep, Rashida raised a query : "You told your friend that you will send a car for him, but where is our car ?"

"Are you very unhappy because we don't have a car yet ?"

As she did not expect a counter-query, and a totally unexpected one like this, Rashida chose to ignore it and remained glumly silent. Munim manifested no wish to break it.

On the following Saturday afternoon, Munim, on returning from his office, approached his wife with great excitement : "Good news for you. A forty-eight model Austin is available. Will you have a look ?"

Rashida was infected with her husband's excitement without trying to understand the reason for it and innocently said : "I can go at once."

The car belonged to a European official who, on the eve of his retirement, was looking for a customer. The car had done only 15,000 miles. The engine was in good shape and the price asked for was five thousand rupees. The owner was also willing to lend his car for inspection free of obligation.

Splendid, Munim thought.

The temporary possession of the car came in very handy. Tomorrow it would go to fetch Shahed and his wife. And they would see how like a lord Munim lived and how like a lady his wife looked in brocade and gold. That would be the time to test his friend and his wife.

On the next afternoon, the car under inspection developed some engine trouble and Munim's all efforts to start the engine failed. Most annoying ! What to do now ? Ah, Rashida was there. She solved the problem neatly : "Ring up the Additional Superintendent of Police, he can perhaps lend a jeep."

Yes, he could. And the jeep would be at Munim's within half an hour. Rashida indeed was such help in a moment of crisis—the cool female mind. Munim had to drive the jeep alone to his friend's place as Rashida said she was very busy making the preparations. Busy, how ? The cook was preparing the meal ; the serving would be done by the bearer at the appropriate time ; the maid-servant was constantly at the beck and call of her mistress. What would then Rashida be busy about ? Oh, now I understand. A deliberate temptation offered.

Munim, in direct confrontation with his mind, began to see himself in a somewhat unflattering light. When Shahed had imploringly written to him for a loan at the time of his wife's serious illness, he was clearly in a position to spare the amount asked for but had not done so. This must have caused Shahed a sharp disappointment despite his present lack of bitterness. And Shahed's wife must have thought him a cad. Whether the bitterness still remained would be worth exploring at tonight's dinner.

A strange feeling of envy for Shahed began to possess Munim's mind and inextricably mixed with this feeling was the thought, Munim realized with a start, of the delicate grace of Shahed's wife. For the last few days Munim was saddened by the suspicion that both he and Rashida had lost a crucial bet to Shahed and his wife. Whether this was really so would be known in the next few hours.

Shahed took Munim to the room which the Town Rationing Officer had generously set apart for his friend and his wife. It was an inadequately furnished room and crowded with clothes and crockery; three cane chairs, a disintegrating table and a plain bedstead gave the room a sordidly cheap look. Shahed's wife got up from the creaking bedstead as her husband and Munim entered the room. She was wearing an ordinary *sari* with a green border and still looking entrancingly lovely.

"I'll get you a glass of lemon *sherbat* in a minute. Excuse me." She glided out of the room with practised grace.

Alone with his friend, Munim did not hesitate for a moment and plunged into the observation : "You must have formed a low opinion of me when I refused to lend you five

hundred rupees."

"Why should I form a low opinion of a friend who found himself unable to advance a loan ?"

"You naturally didn't believe it. I really don't know why I refused." Munim struck a plaintive note.

"Don't think of it, now that the need has gone." Shahed's voice indicated no lingering bitterness. Shahed's wife returned with the glass of *sherbat* on a tray and offered it to Munim with a piercingly sweet smile : "A drink not worthy of a rich man like you, but I hope you'll enjoy it."

For a moment Munim thought there was an undertone of sarcasm in her voice but looking at the brightly happy face of his friend's wife, the suspicion vanished. And he could do no better than look at her in dumb pain—the realization of his own worthlessness in the presence of such spontaneous friendliness.

Rashida received her guests with an air of unbounded joy. She was tastefully dressed and the few ornaments, which she had so imaginatively chosen, gave her a look of an oriental queen. And her inquisitive eyes instantly detected that the silk *sari* which Shahed's wife was wearing was neither new nor expensive ; her necklace was of thin gold ; her bracelets were patently cheap. When Rashida saw the couple unabashedly admiring her drawing room, she felt almost ecstatic. Now, you see my domain, so superior and opulent.

But she felt a crushing sense of disappointment when she saw the couple stealing intimate glances at each other completely oblivious of any material presence. What exactly was the mental exchange between husband and wife, Rashida was quite unable to surmise ; nevertheless, she felt inconsolably slighted. It was a kind of subtle insult to her and to her world of glittering objects ; this absorbed look of the couple so much in love.

Rashida's uneasiness increased as she looked at Munim lost in secret contemplation. A certain melancholy was visible in his features which had curiously acquired an unfamiliar depth. He looked almost poetical, dreaming perhaps of their lissom guest and comparing her with Rashida, his fading wife.

How was Rashida at fault ? She was no beauty, but her eyes had held a certain appeal. And Munim him-

self had courted her long before they were married. She had not taken him by surprise.

What did they lack now ? The house was there, neat and spruce. Also a growing number of influential friends and considerable social prestige. Within a day or two a car would be theirs. And still, after all these years, Munim was looking at the wife of his friend like a frustrated lover. A deep feeling of disappointment and a growing awareness of defeat took hold of Rashida's entire consciousness and soon became a searing torment. This light chiffon *sari* suddenly seemed like a stinging plant crawlingly spread over her body ; the ear-ring felt like a golden deception ; she began to see in her mind's eye one crack after another in their newly-built house.

And Rashida had the stunning realization that the child growing in her womb sucking all the juice of her body would one day, this creature of her blood and flesh, practise an unthinkable monstrous deception on her like this pile of *saris*, like this gleaming house, and like her husband above everything else. And that would be the shattering end of her existence.

The bearer came in and announced : "Dinner is ready."

Now that the table was laid, where was the time for any private sorrow ? The demands of civilized behaviour were inexorable. So, with a touchingly feigned smile she said : "Let's go to the dining room. The table is laid."

Translated from the original Bengali by ALI AHSAN

THE UNWANTED

AHMAD NADIM QASMI

The men and women in this small village stood aghast.

It was not yet ten days after Habib Ahmed's wedding, when the people saw his father Pir Bux walking briskly out of the village, his wife Nekan a few yards behind him, and both of them carrying two large bundles and a little box, which perhaps contained all their belongings.

"Where are they going?" the people murmured. Then, one of the elders walked up to Pir Bux.

"Well, brother, what are you two up to ?" he asked.

"We are going to the fields," Pir Bux replied curtly.

"But you seem to be carrying all your things with you."

"That's right."

"You mean you will stay there ?"

"That's right."

"Which means you are leaving the village ?"

"Well !"

The old man asked no more questions.

By this time Nekan had also joined them. She seemed to be under great nervous strain. When they looked at her, she almost trembled. Perhaps, she had been crying. When she noticed so many eyes watching her, she first looked at her husband, who looked away, and then she burst into tears.

"Don't ask us," she said brokenly to no one in particular. "Go and ask Habib who..."

Pir Bux cut her short. "Why didn't you get on the house top before leaving to inform the whole world instead of

standing at every street corner and crying yourself hoarse ?"

"Let me go," Nekan cried and walked away.

The people of the village kept watching them till they had turned the corner. In a few minutes the news had gone round the whole village that only a couple of days after Habib's marriage, his mother and his bride had fallen out. It happened that Nekan had been trying to arrange the dowry that her daughter-in-law had brought, around the house, when a glass slipped out of her hand, fell on a china plate and both of them broke into a hundred pieces all over the floor. The bride who was in the next house, surrounded by girls curious to see and talk to her, sprang up when she heard the noise and was at the scene of the mishap in a jiffy. She surveyed the damage, then said in a very loud voice, the loudest she had ever used in her new home: "Auntie, these were things I had brought from my parents' home !"

"They belong to my son as well," Nekan retorted.

"Even if they had been exclusively mine, who would not feel sorry for the loss of a new and unused object ?" Habib put in.

Nekan froze at this. She looked like a broken piece of china herself. In the evening she complained to her husband, who spoke to Habib about it. Habib didn't say anything but rushed into his wife's room and when he came back after some time, he just stood there, in front of his father, looking sullen.

Pir Bux waited for him to speak. When he didn't, Pir Bux asked: "What did she have to say ?"

Without looking at his parents, Habib said: "What could the poor thing say ?"

Nekan retorted cuttingly: "The poor thing must have had something to say !"

"Do you want me to divorce her?" Habib shouted.

"Don't talk to me like this my son," Nekan said with a lump in her throat. "First go and wash my milk off your mouth !"

Pir Bux only said: "Some money is still left from what was spent at your marriage. I'll go to town tomorrow and buy your wife a glass and a china plate."

Habib stared at his father rudely and walked out of the room.

The next five days were very quiet. The son didn't speak to his parents, nor did they speak much to each other. They were tense and unsure of everything.

At nights they would sleep in a corner of the backyard. The new couple had their two cots laid out as far away as was possible.

"They are talking," Nekan would whisper to her husband.

"What ?" Pir Bux would mutter, turning on his side.

"I said they are talking."

"Well, why not ? They are man and wife."

"Why don't they talk to us ?"

"Let them first talk to each other."

"Listen," Nekan told her husband one day, "why don't you go, buy the two pieces, and throw them in the face of your daughter-in-law ? What is on your mind ?"

"I don't know," Pir Bux answered reflectively. "I have been thinking. She doesn't come from a poor home. If I did that she may, for the rest of her life, consider us mean. After all, we have to live and die in this house !"

"You men do not understand these matters. Get her the things."

"Alright."

"No, you should do it tomorrow; otherwise I'll continue to feel a stranger in the house."

The next day, after his morning prayers, Pir Bux went to town and before noon came back with the replacements. He went to his wife who was in the kitchen and put them in front of her. She picked up the glass and the china plate and walked across to her son who was smoking a *hookah* and interestedly watching his wife applying *ghee* to her *henna*-dyed hands.

"Here you are, daughter," she said. "This squares up matters."

The girl didn't say anything, but Habib rose up in anger and snatching the two objects from his mother, smashed them against the wall.

Nekan sat down on the ground in a daze. Pir Bux said nothing. Soon she was crying hysterically. Both of them, without saying anything to each other, seemed to have arrived at a decision. They packed up their things and walked out of the house. They made a great deal of noise in the process, but

neither of the young couple took any notice.

Only once did the son say, "You are not doing the right thing," but he made no attempt to stop them.

Pir Bux used to till the land himself. He had built a little log cabin in one of the fields. During the harvesting season, he used to stay there with his wife. They would both look after the ripe crops. When Habib used to be younger and at school, they would not bring him along but leave him for about three months with his aunt. Every Saturday evening, he would come to meet his parents, spend the next day with them and when, along with his mother, he would shout to scare the birds away, she would say: "No, son, you shouldn't do that. When you grow up you are to become a *munshi*."

Habib didn't become a *munshi*, but he put up a small shop. In the beginning, all he had there were some provisions ; then he stocked in some cloth, and put up a sign outside: "Malik Habib Ahmed, Cloth Merchant." In about three to four years, he had earned enough to be considered among the rich in the village. He made his father sell his cattle and ploughs and hand over the lands to cultivators. He put chairs and tables in the house, bought a battery-operated radio set and was very proud of the aerial on top of the house. To him, it was like a royal pennant.

The shift from the cot to the chair also meant extremely good matrimonial offers for Habib. His mother would look around the house and the china lined on shelves and hear the radio announce "This is Lahore" and tell the match-makers: "Are you out of your minds ? You should know better. Even Caucasion fairies are not good enough for my son ?"

One day she received the offer for which she had been waiting. The richest man in the village, on whose lands Pir Bux had once been a cultivator, came down to their house one day and offered the hand of his daughter to Pir Bux's son. When Pir Bux told his wife about it, she was delirious with joy. The marriage was performed with a great deal of fanfare. And, only after four days, the bride's china had been smashed.

When they came to the log cabin, Nekan looked around and began sweeping the floor amid tears. Pir Bux sat outside, looking at the fields, without any expression on his face. He had tilled and ploughed every inch of this land with his own

hands, but it seemed to him now that he was a stranger here.

By the evening, everyone out in the fields had come to know that Pir Bux and his wife had left the village and come back to the log cabin. Early next morning, the farmers from nearby fields started pouring in. Everyone consoled them with observations like: "After marriage sons are severed into two pieces and mothers are left with the longing to have them back in their arms."

Pir Bux would say: "No, it is really nothing of the sort. The *hakim* has advised Nekan to spend a few days in the open. We shan't be here long."

Nekan also kept the pretense for some time, but when two of their former cultivators came to see her, she couldn't contain herself and burst into tears. She wailed: "Why do you come and ask me ? Go and ask him who sold off his parents in exchange for a wife !"

And just then Habib walked in. He had heard her. "Have you no thought for my respect in the village ?" he said

Nekan was stunned for a moment. "What do you mean by *your* respect? Don't *we* have any respect? Do you think that like all the life savings that we squandered at your marriage, we squandered our self-respect too? I carried you in my body for nine months. I gave you birth and I was to live to see this day !"

Pir Bux came in. "Stop that wailing," he shouted.

"You leave me alone," she screamed and went out.

"I had come to take you home," Habib shouted at his mother, "but you have slapped my face in front of all these people."

"We are still not dead, son," Nekan spoke in a choked voice. "When that happens you can, with the permission of your wife, come and take our dead bodies away. While living, we shall never enter that house."

"You are out of your mind," Pir Bux shouted at his wife. But Habib had already left.

A few days after this incident, Nekan fell ill. Habib came many times, by himself and with the village elders, trying to persuade his parents to come back, but Nekan was adamant. And then one morning she died. When Habib and other relations came to take the body, Pir Bux joined the procession silently.

When her coffin was carried into the old house, Pir Bux suddenly remembered something. When Nekan was young, she would burst into tears at the smallest excuse. And he would tell her: "This is one thing in which women are one up on men." And Nekan would start smiling. But now she was dead and even if he were to start crying, there would be nobody to smile at him. And then no one ever cried in public view over his wife's death. It gave him a kind of satisfaction to see Habib crying.

In the evening, they sat in the backyard with those who had come to condole the death. Later when food arrived, sent by a near relation, and Habib got up to help his father wash hands, for a moment, even he forgot about the death of his wife.

After the late evening prayers, when all the wailing women had left and Pir Bux was left alone with his son and daughter-in-law, Habib came to him. For a few minutes he just stood there, then burst forth into tears. He fell at his father's feet and said: "Forgive me father! Mother didn't forgive me her milk but on Judgment Day, I'll ask her forgiveness. If I have your forgiveness, I'll have mother's too."

This seemed to have released all the tensions that Pir Bux had been making desperate attempts all day not to show. He burst into tears and cried himself hoarse. Habib shouted to his wife: "Come here Khatoon and press father's feet."

This was the first time Khatoon had appeared before Pir Bux after Nekan's death. Both of them started massaging and pressing his legs and arms and Pir Bux felt as if he was the luckiest father in the world.

Till the Thursday following, Habib kept his shop closed as a sign of mourning. All day long he would sit at home and recite the Quran. He wouldn't let his father do anything. His food was brought to him by Khatoon and she would help him eat. "Don't sit too close to the fire, daughter. It is bad for the complexion," he would tell her. "And ask Habib to open the shop on Friday positively."

When Habib left the house early Friday morning, Pir Bux, for the first time, felt forlorn. He walked about in the back-yard, then went out in the street and kept looking at the passersby. Then he went back into the house. Khatoon was in the kitchen. He sat next to her and said: "Poor Nekan

also used to sit exactly here and cook. Before her, my mother sat in the same place for forty years. And right here, where I am sitting now, I used to tease and cajole her." Then he started laughing like a child. "I used to love *ghee*," he said.

"But it is very expensive these days, father," she replied.

"But, daughter, I didn't mean that. I couldn't even digest it now. I was just thinking how quickly time passes", he said. "The day before it was mother sitting here, yesterday it was Nekan and today it is you."

"Why don't you say that you are awaiting my death now? "Khatoon replied.

Pir Bux felt as if someone had hit him with a hammer. Like a child who has been whipped, he got up and left the kitchen. He tried his best not to, but a few tears rolled down his cheeks. When Habib came back from the shop in the evening, Pir Bux was sitting at the street corner, drawing lines in the dust with a straw.

He rose up and joined his son. When Khatoon brought them their food, all his tension suddenly left him. Then he sat down on the cot and began to smoke his *hookah*. When his *hookah* was going cold, he called out to Khatoon: "Daughter, get me a few cinders."

"I am washing dishes," she said.

"Pick them up with a pair of tongs," he insisted.

She threw the utensils on the ground, then brought him the cinders. She just threw them at his feet.

Pir Bux didn't use them. They just lay there and went cold.

In the evening, when Habib came back home, he met his father in the street. Pir Bux held his hand and told him of the day's incidents. Habib wrenched his hand free and ran into the house.

Pir Bux stood there for a long time. After a long, long time, he had suddenly remembered his sister. He thought that had she been alive, he would have gone to her. He was uneasy that his son had not come out to take him in. He had a desire, which he tried to quell, to sit there all night, till Habib came out to get him. Anyway, he sat next to a wall. Suddenly he heard approaching voices. He quickly ran into the house. He didn't want anybody to see him sitting outside his own home. Habib was standing in the backyard quietly and Khatoon was trying to make a fire.

Pir Bux felt as if the backyard was full of ghosts. To break the silence, he dragged his cot noisily in a corner. Nobody ate that night. Pir Bux kept awake. Every now and then, he would get up from his bed and stare into the night. He had a sudden impulse to walk out of the house, take to the open spaces and never come back ; but even the lands that were once his, now belonged to his son.

It was true that his son had said nothing to him, but he also hadn't eaten anything that night. After all, they were man and wife and Pir Bux couldn't bear to think that he had caused tension in the house.

Once Nekan had had a quarrel with him and for days he had felt listless. He had even stopped offering his prayers. All day long he would walk about in the fields. One day, when he was trying to chop some wood, he had injured himself and Nekan had run up to him and put a bandage around his bleeding finger. After that they had sworn that they would never quarrel again.

It was morning now. He heard the *muazzin's* call from the mosque and very quietly he got up from his bed. His throat was parched. He went across to where the pitcher lay to get himself a drink.

"Are you up father ?" Habib spoke up.

"Yes, son." He felt as if he had been caught doing something wrong.

"Is there any water in the pitcher, father ?" he asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Do you hear, it is morning," he said to Khatoon.

"I have been awake since long," she replied.

"Do you think I wasn't?" he said.

Then, something happened. Probably, Habib had tickled his wife and both of them burst into laughter.

A wave of anger rose within Pir Bux, a fitful sense of frustration and alienated pride. His son had ignored his own father and reconciled with his wife. But had he even quarrelled with her at all the previous evening over what he had told him ? Did his son consider him worth a quarrel with his wife ?

They were now talking loudly and laughing. When he was washing himself for his prayers, he felt that they were laughing at him, at his old age and helplessness, at his weakness

and utter dependence upon them. The glass fell from his hand and broke into bits. Both of them jumped out of their beds, looked at Pir Bux but did not speak.

Pir Bux thought that it was good Khatoon hadn't said anything, but Habib's silence surely meant that he was upset over the loss. He got up to say his prayers and he realised that he was doing so with the least feeling. It was an act of automation.

Time had come for Habib to go to the shop, but he still hadn't said anything to his father over last evening's incident. He just sat there on his prayer-mat, counting his beads. When Habib was about to leave, he came up to his father and said. "Father !"

"Yes, son !"

"You didn't smoke your *hookah* this morning !" Pir Bux didn't want to say anything in reply that might be interpreted as a complaint against Khatoon. "How did you think of that, son ?" he asked. But Habib had moved away to the kitchen. Pir Bux followed him. He was preparing his father's *hookah*. Khatoon was sitting close to her husband, her head in her two hands, as if she was quite indifferent to what Habib was doing.

"Son, my clothes are getting dirty. Could you bring me a cake of soap ? I'll go down to the village pond and wash them myself," Pir Bux said.

"But the clothes could be washed at home," he replied quickly.

Pir Bux felt like smiling. He looked at Khatoon who sat there with an expressionless face. She looked like a shy, little girl.

A little later, Pir Bux went into his little room, took off his clothes, wrapped a sheet around his bare body and went back into the kitchen, placing the unwashed clothes in front of Khatoon.

"What am I to do with them?" Khatoon said sharply.

"They are to be washed," Pir Bux answered. "Didn't Habib say that were to be washed at home? He is not going to wash them himself. You'll have to do it."

"I can't," she said. "I have never washed clothes in my whole life."

"Then who is going to wash them?" Pir Bux said sternly.

"You wash them or Habib or anybody ! I just can't,"

she pushed the clothes towards him.

"If you can't, I can't either," he said petulantly.

"I absolutely refuse to." There was hate in her voice.

"I'll go and tell Habib," Pir Bux threatened.

Khatoon got up. She put her hands on her hips very aggressively and rasped: "Go and tell him ! Tell him now. I know your son. Don't you talk to me again or I'll tell my father to have you whipped, both of you, in the middle of the village square. "

"Have me whipped ?" Pir Bux repeated the words disbelievingly. Then he said: "I am sixty, girl, and nobody ever spoke to me like that. I do not know about your father, but before he comes, I'll have my son whip you. You stupid woman !"

Khatoon bent down and picking up a clay pot threw it at Pir Bux who ducked in time. The pot was smashed into bits against the wall. Then Khatoon started wailing and cursing loudly.

Pir Bux paid no attention to her. He picked up his bundle of unwashed clothes, went back to his little room, put them on, and rushed out of the house to his son's shop. It was full of customers. First he just stood in the door, panting. Then he quietly sat down in a corner.

When the rush had cleared, Habib noticed him.

"Hello father ! Are you here ? When did you come ? What is the matter ?"

Pir Bux just stared at his son for a few minutes before saying: "Nothing, son ! I only came down to see how you were, how you looked sitting here ."

Habib smiled shyly, bent down on a ledger and started writing something.

Translated from the original Urdu by KHALID HASSAN

THE LEADER

ABU JAFAR SHAMSUDDIN

The political party I was connected with did not have enough speakers. So, after having delivered a few speeches, I was easily accepted as a small leader.

I can't remember today what formed the subject matter of my speeches in those days. But this I distinctly remember that when I used to come down from the platform after finishing my speech, men and women present in the meeting would clap their hands in thunderous applause and that sound would almost make me swoon with happiness. I became enamoured of my own gifts.

I was sorry that I did not exploit this latent power of mine earlier in life. I rebuked myself that in those precious years I was busy with the problem of earning paltry sums to keep my body and soul together. Had I not done so, today my name would certainly have found a place in real printed letters along with the names of the great leaders of all-Bengal repute. I had not the slightest doubt about that. Particularly, there would have been no doubt about it if I had joined some old political party. I could possibly have become a cabinet minister today.

When I spoke in party meetings, ladies and gentlemen present listened in pin-drop silence. I noticed that Miss Tara, my friend Devaki's sister, gazed at me with an earnestness the meaning of which I, an orator only and not a poet, failed to grasp. But I could understand this much that the look certainly carried a meaning in it. There was regard and respect

in it ; there was probably love too.

I had never been loved by a woman before. As such, I did not know the sweetness such love bestows on one. But due to simple biological reasons, I had the normal curiosity and eagerness about a woman.

Not that there was no desire, too.

And so I felt a little inclined towards Miss Tara. I loved to talk to her every now and then on all sorts of pretexts.

She talked with me in an atmosphere of awe and reverence. She had just passed her matriculation examination. It was only natural that she should feel awe-struck when associated with a renowned leader like me.

A kind of intimacy grew between us. And I began to associate myself with Devaki more closely than ever. He was a celebrated political worker. He had direct contacts with the anarchist leaders of the age. His name was well know all over Bengal.

When I met him, he had lost all faith in the anarchist movement and ideology. He had learnt through bitter experience the simple truth that the goal he had in view could never be achieved without the active co-operation and assistance of the general mass.

As soon as he realised this, he began to tour from village to village working ceaselessly for creating mass support for his party. He daily covered on foot mile after mile of the mud-spattered dusty village roads.

The famine of 1950 had already begun by then. The talk of politics, of the masses combining to fight the evil of fascism, appeared ridiculous at that hour. But Devaki worked on without rest. He talked to the village people about political affairs. Occasionally, he organised meetings too, in the bazars.

And he once invited me to speak at such a meeting. He said : "Tara is in politics and will speak in the meeting. You must come."

I was over-joyed to hear that Tara would be going. The meeting would be in a far away village. We would not be able to return to the city on the same day. Naturally there was no doubt about the fact that I would get ample opportunity to mix with Tara freely. If I let go such a golden chance, it might not come again. No sooner was the proposal made

than I decided to accept it.

However, ego demanded a little show of reluctance. So I made up my mind not to give my consent outright. I asked : "How far is the place ?"

"Quite some way off, my friend. We have to go by bus. About thirty miles."

"Where shall we stay the night ?"

"You needn't worry about that. There is a fairly prosperous family of fishermen there. I have sent word that we shall stay with them."

"Say, will there be a good crowd or shall I have to shout myself hoarse before a paltry gathering of a hundred or two ?"

"Well, we hope to have a very laıge crowd. People have been informed of the meeting by beat of drum in the huts and bazars. Besides, people have been told that the food situation would also be discussed in the meeting. There definitely will be a large crowd."

For one thing, there was the certain prospect of Tara's close company for over twenty-four hours, and then again this assurance of Devaki regarding a big gathering. My eagerness to go grew greater than ever.

I said : "Well, since you are pressing so hard, I shall go."

Devaki left after saying once again : "You must come."

Next morning, after having my meals early, I came to the corner of the Gariahata Road. On my arrival there I saw Tara standing by the side of Devaki, looking pretty in her simple dress.

Devaki looked pleased to see me. He said : "Hello, come along. There are only five minutes for the bus to leave."

I took my place beside Tara in silence and began to think if it would ever be possible to demolish the insurmountable wall of social barriers and get Tara as my companion for life.

Soon after, the bus proceeded with us at a great speed.

* * * *

The bazar of a remote village in Bengal. It was as wretched in look as it was small in size. A few sheds stood in the middle of the bazar looking like so many widows. No shed had a regular wall. Among the covered sheds there was only one grocery shop. It was the Summer of 1943.

It was nearly 5 p.m. when we arrived there, covering a distance of about three miles on foot from the bus-station

along the zig-zag route through the village paddy fields. People had already begun to assemble for the meeting.

* * * *

I got up to speak. I spoke fervently on home and foreign politics and strongly attacked the fascist powers. I had to speak on the tyranny of British Imperialism. Cheers greeted my speech from time to time.

Dusk was approaching. The sun was about to set. It was getting dark slowly.

And suddenly a queer scene revealed itself before me. I was speaking from a raised platform, and so I could see things quite far way off.

I saw a long queue of human beings nearly half a mile away. They were all women and were coming to this direction. The procession came nearer. The human figures also grew distinct.

The lean emaciated figures, covered in dirty rags, were approaching with bodies bent against the gusty wind blowing from the opposite direction. They were hardly able to stand the blast of the wind and so they stooped more and more. The heads of some appeared to have been bent so low as to touch the very ground. Their hair, bereft of oil for ages and mixed with dust and sand, had formed itself into hard knots. There was no cloth over the head and the strong wind blew the rough knotty hair this way and that like loose leaves of the trees. The ends of the rags, with which they covered their bodies, fluttered in the wind. In the dark bronze figures there was nothing left but some bones. The stomach had become almost one with the back. The store-house of sweet honey, the breasts, had grown dry and skinny like bats and were hanging in their front like torn shirt-pockets. Some of them carried children on their back or in their laps or arms.

They were still approaching, looking like a batch of reptiles crawling on their belly in crooked zig-zag fashion. A ferocious hunger glowed in their eyes and face. They looked like the clouds of Baisakh coming forward at a tremendous speed from the northern countries to engulf the whole world in a terrific tempest. Small, large, medium-sized clouds, clouds of all sizes and colours, terrifyingly black, pitch dark, black with brown and white fringes, coloured with the shades of a comet, black mixed with the glow of the sun from a different

world, black clouds in small groups or ranged in order, strata after strata, advanced relentlessly to appease their hunger for the whole year.

They advanced. Their long arms appeared to be hanging from some artificial socket, severing themselves from the rest of their bodies. They hung like the loose bark of some huge tree, after its branches were lopped off. They looked exactly like the arms of a skeleton in the sockets and had taken on the reddish tinge of some fierce-looking reptile. Like the teeth of the crocodile, their teeth also appeared to have been projected through their jaw.

It seemed to me that they were the procession of *Yajuj-Majuj*. They had eaten up the hills and mountains with their sharp tongues and yet their hunger had not been appeased. And so they had stepped out today in the wide open earth, today they would devour the trees, the herbs and all vegetation, men, animals, birds, fish and sea water ; in short, they would eat up everything within their reach on land, water and air and would thus satisfy their hunger. As the flood water rising from the troubled sea advances relentlessly devouring everything that falls in its way, so would these creatures move forward today devouring all that would fall in their way : there would be no charity, no sympathy, no hatred nor envy, nor the power to think ; nothing of humanity would remain; intoxicated with their mad hunger, they would devour the whole world with the supreme indifference of a cold-blooded beast. They would do so as indifferently as the lizard in the wall devours the insects.

There was no escape from that terrible hunger. There was no escape for you or I or for that matter for any one.

I could not tell you when I stopped speaking. But though I had ceased speaking, I remained on the platform staring before me with a fixed gaze. All the hair had stood up. I found myself tied fast to the platform as if by some powerful magnet.

It seemed that I stood there patiently waiting to be devoured by those fast approaching human reptiles, like the poor victims of the python before whose gaze they feel absolutely powerless and ultimately walk into its mouth.

They came still nearer. Gradually they came very close to the place of the meeting. The skinny arms of a few skeletons

suddenly shot forward. Those out-stretched arms tried to grab whatever they could find before them. They looked like the legs of huge prawns trying to catch their prey with their nails. It appeared to me that some skeletons had suddenly come to life by magic and had assembled there to gobble up the entire human civilization.

All of a sudden these ghost-ridden skeletons broke forth in a mighty shout : "Give us rice, we want food, we want paddy." Their shrill cries sounded like the simultaneous splitting up of a large number of dry bamboos in a jungle. This terrible noise released me from my trance. With a wild shout I jumped off the rostrum and began to race along the red gravelled road of the District Board. I felt that my life and death depended on my success in this race. I dared not look back. The words "give us rice, we want food, we want paddy" constantly dinned against my ears. The words pierced my eardrums and beat like hammers at my heart.

I ran faster and faster still. I forgot about all others. As I ran, I only thought of saving myself. I was a leader. I was the speaker. They would most certainly devour me. The skeletons seemed to be coming after me, shouting out those terrible words.

I ran faster and faster. I had to save myself at all costs. I was a leader. I had a future before me. The ghost-ridden skeleton-like figures would soon merge with the ground and then my golden days would once again re-appear. It was, therefore, essential on my part that I should escape from this attack of theirs on that day. I swore that I would most decidedly survive and ran for my very life.

The pity of it, however, is that I am still running. The race has not come to an end even today.

Translated from the original Bengali by KABIR CHOWDHURY

NO MUSIC BEFORE MOSQUE

ZEBUN-NISA HAMIDULLAH

Although all bowed their heads in prayer, there were two in the mosque that evening whose thoughts were not on Almighty Allah. Even as they did *sijda*, Ahmed glanced sideways at his father. The expression he saw on the old face was sufficient to tell him that his father had heard and, this time, would not forgive. And so, although he strove to concentrate on the verses of the *Quran* that fell, parrot-like, from his lips, he found it quite impossible to do so. All he could think of was his youngest brother and all he could hear was the shrill and sweet music of the flute.

Prayers concluded, the congregation began to disperse. Usually Vilayet Ali lingered in the courtyard of the mosque conversing with his friends until it was time for dinner. Not so today. Without so much as a look either to the left or right, he hurriedly put on his shoes and walked quickly away and on to the uneven path-way that skirted the rice fields, passed the village pond and went up to his house.

Ahmed followed his father and, as soon as they were out of hearing of the others, Vilayet Ali unleashed his anger. "Did you hear ?" he hissed. "Did you hear?" he repeated, so vehemently that even his long grey beard shook with his fury ; "By Allah," he swore, looking angrily up at the cloudy monsoon sky, "he shall pay for this tonight."

Little Nazo's chubby hands clasped and unclasped the raw mango nervously. She had been sitting under the mango tree waiting for her father and grandfather for the past half

hour. It had been lonely there as the shadows lengthened and, because she was afraid and because she wanted confidence, she had picked up a raw mango from the ground where it had fallen during the storm earlier in the day, and bit into it with her sharp, white teeth.

Nazo had run here almost immediately after the sound of the flute had reached her ears. Until that time she had been playing with her cousins putting the rag dolls, that their mothers had made for them from old cotton sarees, to bed on little pieces of matting; and when the *azaan* had commenced, she had gone to the window and from it waved to her father and grandfather as they walked towards the village mosque. Then suddenly the sound had come. The sound of the flute, so sweet and so disturbing. Usually, she loved to hear it and would leave whatever she was doing, clamber on to the window sill and sit gazing up at the tall palm trees, listening.

But now her little heart stopped dead for a second, and her rag doll with its two long plaits of jute dyed black, fell listlessly from her hands. "There will be trouble," she thought, her stomach sickening inside her, "much trouble." And the pupils of her big black eyes dilated with dread as the music of the flute mingled with the rich, sonorous, inspiring sound of the call to prayer.

Slipping away from her play-mates, she went to the kitchen where the women of the family were preparing the evening meal. Her mother was stirring a sauce-pan and, with her cheeks flushed with the heat of the fire and her lips red with the *paan* she had just eaten, she made a pretty picture. Nazo squatted down close beside her and watched her grandmother straining away the water from the boiled rice. A sudden gust of breeze blew the kitchen door wide open and the sounds of the evening came into them: first the sonorous sound of the *azaan* followed by the sweet shrillness of the flute. The old woman's hands became unsteady as she heard it, and much of the rice slipped out with the water. Hastily she put the pot aside and, going out of the kitchen, stood in the narrow courtyard, listening.

Nazo followed her, and the old woman twisted the ends of her saree nervously. "Allah have mercy on us !" she cried, "Allah have mercy on us !" as the sounds of the *azaan* and the flute continued. Her two daughters-in-law had also come out of the kitchen and she turned towards them in her agitation.

"What am I to do ?" she almost wailed, "what am I to do with him ?"

Nazo's mother strove to speak light-heartedly. "Maybe it is not him at all," she said.

"I'm sure it's not him," soothed the second daughter-in-law, "the last train from the city could not have come in yet."

"Yes," said the old woman cheering up, "he can't have returned as yet, must be someone else."

The *azaan* finished and there was a second or two ofcomplete silence. And then suddenly the sound of the flute came once more towards them, now louder and sweeter. And, even as they heard it, their hearts sank, for they knew that only Ali in the whole village could play the flute as it was being played now.

"God have mercy upon us," whispered the old woman once again, her face full of her anxiety, "his father will not forgive him this time."

Little Nazo's heart fluttered within her as she looked at the fearful faces of the women. "I have told him," the old woman was now almost in tears, "I have told him time and time again not to fritter away his time with his flute," she wailed, "I have forbidden him playing it at prayer time. And yet.... God forgive me," she moaned, "God forgive me for giving birth to a son who acts like an infidel."

"Don't be so harsh on him, mother," broke in Nazo's mother, "Ali is a good lad and a truthful one."

"Yes," chimed in the second daughter-in-law, "he is gentle and kind and pure of heart."

"But then why does he do these things," his mother moaned, "why will he waste his time playing on the flute instead of attending to his studies like other boys ? And why does he persist in playing it during the hours of prayer even though his father has thrashed him for it many times without number ?"

"Because that's the way he prays," little Nazo spoke almost without realising it, and the women turned towards her in astonishment. "He told me that," she continued, her big black eyes strangely solemn in the little face, her childish voice grave. "He told me that," she went on, "told me that he prays to Allah with his flute. That's his way of telling Allah how much he loves Him...."

The women smiled indulgently at the grave little girl. "Run away and play, you old head on young shoulders," said her grandmother, pinching her chubby little cheek.

Nazo obeyed her grandmother and ran away, but she did not run back to her play-mates. Instead, she ran out of the house and turned down the little path-way that led to the village mosque. It was deserted at this late hour and, as the shadows lengthened, little Nazo felt afraid. But she ran on and on until she neared the village pond, and then her pace slackened and little shivers of fear ran down her spine, for she remembered the stories she had heard about the *jinn* who haunted the pond....

A familiar mango tree gave her fresh courage and, although she could not bring herself to go past the pond alone, she sat down on a stone at the side of it and waited. Small though she was, she was quite clear in her mind as to what she intended to do. She wanted to meet her father and grandfather as they returned from their evening prayers. She knew that her grandfather had a special fondness for her, that she was his pet, and she wanted to cheer him up and, if possible, drive the anger from his heart before he reached home.

And so she sat, a solitary little figure, under the tall mango tree. Six years old, that's all she was, but the heart that beat within her was the heart of a woman. And with a woman's compassion she wanted to shield her favourite uncle from his father's wrath.

Sitting there, her little knees tucked under her, biting every now and then into the raw mango so as to still her fears, Nazo thought about her uncle, her youngest uncle whom she loved with the passionate affection that young girls often give to their eldest brothers. He was so different to the other boys in the village, so gentle and so kind ; yet everybody was so harsh to him, especially grandfather-dear old grandfather who had never once uttered an unkind word to her, but had thrashed this gentle son of his, this child of his old age, so often and so mercilessly.

And almost every time it had been about the flute. This little Nazo could not understand. She loved the music of the flute, loved the way Ali played it, coaxing so much beauty out of the reed. And she wondered why no one else could understand what she understood so fully ; that Ali prayed to Allah

through his flute. "I speak to God," he had said, when she had asked him about it one day. "I thank Him for all that He has given me, the beauty of the rice fields, the loveliness of the moonlight on the pond, the magic of the monsoon skies and for the sweetness of humans such as you." And then suddenly his voice had turned harsh and hard. "I'd rather pray to God this way," he added, "than mumble prayers that I do not understand."

They were coming, it could not be anyone but them, she told herself as she heard the sound of approaching foot-steps, and she bit hard into the mango to ease her fears jumping up in relief as her father and grandfather came in sight. Quietly she waited in the shadows and then, just as they were almost upon her, she jumped in front of them with a loud "Coo-ee-ee". Both Vilayet Ali and Ahmad were taken by surprise and, for a moment, felt alarmed, until gurgling with laughter Nazo pushed her warm, soft hand into her grandfather's large one, giggled up at him and questioned saucily: "Did I frighten you, grandfather ?"

Seeing the chubby little figure laughing up at him, all the anger vanished from Vilayet Ali's heart. "You little bundle of mischief," he laughed, tweaking her ear affectionately, "saucy girl, trying to frighten your grandfather." Ahmed too, laughed out loud; not so much at his daughter's childish prank as at the fact that his father's anger had been blown away. Mighty pleased with herself, Nazo slipped her other hand into her father's and pranced home between the two men, chatting merrily all the way.

Even as they reached the courtyards, her grandmother pounced upon her. "Where on earth have you been, you naughty little girl?" she demanded angrily, all her fears and irritations finding an outlet on the laughing little girl. "We've been looking for you everywhere. Go at once and have your dinner." Crest-fallen, little Nazo untwined her fingers from the hands of the two men slowly, hoping against hope that her grandfather at least would say something in her defence. But Vilayet Ali had already forgotten all about her.

"Has that rascal come home yet ?" he asked his wife angrily. "Ali ?" she questioned. "Who else ?" he stormed. "Who else but that spoiled brat of your old age would dare so to dishonour the fair name of the family ? Who else would

dare to play music before mosques ?" His face was red again with anger and the family exchanged apprehensive glances with each other. And, even as they did so, the ominous rumble of thunder announced the approach of yet another monsoon storm.

"Had it been any other but my own flesh and blood, I would have beaten his brains out long ago," continued the old man, his wrath increasing as he noted the wrath of the heavens, "but because of you," he glared reprovingly upon his aged wife, "because you are always pampering him and always pleading for the boy, I've been lenient in the past. But, by Allah, this time it is too much ! I'm going to beat him until he is black and blue and begs for mercy. And mercy he will only get when he swears never, never to play that cursed flute again. Where is he," he asked, suddenly suspicious, "are you hiding him ? Are you...."

"He has not yet returned," said his wife soothingly, "remember ? He went to the city to find out his Matriculation results."

"Of course, he is back," stormed her husband, "didn't I hear the rascal throughout my prayers ? Didn't I hear him defying God every single moment I was in the mosque ?"

"Perhaps, he was playing his flute on the way home from the station and did not know that the hour of prayer had come, for he is not back home yet," she replied even more soothingly.

"Not home yet !" shouted Vilayet Ali, determined not to allow his anger to be assuaged, "I can tell you why. He must have failed in his exam, that's what he must have done, the young nit-wit. Let him come home, let him come home...."

Little Nazo went away with a sinking heart. She did not even join her cousins for dinner, but went straight to her room, curled up on the straw *chattai* and tried to sleep and forget the fact that her darling uncle was going to be severely thrashed that night. But, although sleep did eventually come, it was disturbed and fitful and full of nightmares in which not only her beloved uncle, but she as well, was thrashed mercilessly by her grandfather who, in her dreams, had turned into a terrible monster.

It must have been almost morning when unusual sounds awoke her, for the cocks had started crowing. It was, however, still dark in the room although outside in the courtyard lights

twinkled from nearly a dozen hurricane lanterns. What on earth is going on, Nazo wondered, as she stood in the doorway watching. There was quite a crowd assembled in the courtyard, all talking excitedly and she noticed the alarmed expression on her father and her grandfather's faces.

It had just stopped raining and rain drops still trickled from the edges of the roof and came gushing down in torrents from the drain pipes. Nazo noticed that none of them seemed to care that their clothes were drenched, and it was obvious that whatever it was that had happened was sufficiently serious to make standing in the rain at this unearthly hour and getting drenched to the skin, a matter of no consequence.

"He's nowhere !" she heard her grandmother cry in a voice so shrill with terror that she scarcely recognised it, "we've looked for him everywhere, even on the roof, but he's nowhere."

"It's him, I told you it was him," Nazo heard a voice she recognised as belonging to the village barber, say excitedly.

"Come on !" her father shouted impatiently, "let's waste no more time." Quickly he began walking towards the fields, the other men following him, their feet slipping sometimes in the slush, their hurricane lanterns swinging to and fro casting eerie circles of light amid the surrounding darkness.

Her grandfather, Nazo noticed, walked slower than usual and he seemed to be breathing deeply as if in pain. But it was obvious that he was straining every nerve to keep up with the younger men. Evading the eyes of the women of the family, Nazo slipped silently away and out of the house through the bushes and joined her grandfather as soon as their home was safely behind them.

Although she was a little afraid that her grandfather might scold her and send her back for coming out at this unearthly hour, she slipped her hand gently into his, for she was greatly concerned at the terrible unhappiness she saw in his face. Vilayet Ali brightened visibly as he saw the child and clasped her warm little hand firmly, as if the touch of it brought him much solace.

Frogs croaked and the little creatures of the night gave forth their music as the men walked down the slushy, narrow pathway in single file. On and on they went, all of them silent, until at last Nazo realised that they were going towards Ali's favourite tree. The one under which he loved to sit and play

his flute and where he had taught her to play a simple little tune.

Suddenly the village barber, who was walking a few paces behind her father, rushed forward and caught Ahmed by the arm. "There !" he cried, pointing towards a tall tree, "there it is !" and he lifted high his hurricane lantern and pointed upwards. "See, see !" he cried excitedly. One by one the lanterns were raised and by their light Nazo saw a dearly familiar figure dangling grotesquely from one of its branches.

"Look at the face," cried the barber urgently, rushing forward and raising his lantern on a bamboo pole, "didn't I tell you it was Ali ? Didn't I.... That's his...."

"Stop it, stop it, you fool !" cried Ahmed seizing him by the shoulders. The barber turned around impatiently, but the words of anger died on his lips for something in Ahmed's haggard face silenced him, and slowly, shame-facedly he lowered the lantern.

But all of them had seen enough to know who it was that hung there. Vilayet Ali pushed little Nazo roughly aside and rushed towards the tree. As he did so, his foot slipped and he fell flat into the slush and when he stood up again his clothes, that were invariably so spotless, were soiled and sodden and his grey beard bespattered with mud. "It's my son," he cried, "it's Ali, my son. Take him down, take him down !" And he burst out sobbing like a little child.

The men averted their eyes from him, while some took him by the shoulders and strove to comfort him. The barber had already climbed the tree and now he took out his sharp shaving knife and cut the rope from which the figure of Ali was hanging. As the limp body fell, Ahmed put up his strong arms to receive it, but even so it fell upon the ground and with the jolt the flute that Ali held so firmly in one of his hands, was jerked out of his stiffening fingers and rolled upon the earth.

All hovered anxiously around the village doctor as he examined the body and, as he shook his head sorrowfully, the sobs of Vilayet Ali became louder and more heart-rending, and many of the men began to wipe the tears that had forced themselves from their eyes. Nazo crept forward and, picking up her uncle's flute from out of the slush, began to wipe it with the edge of her garment. Her father saw her, but instead of anger there was relief in his eyes. "Go to grandfather," he whisper-

ed, before turning and issuing instructions to the others. Then he and three other men lifted the lifeless body and, with two going ahead to light the way, the sorrowful procession began its homeward journey.

Two of Vilayet Ali's friends assisted him along, for the old man was now in a pitiable state of sorrow and remorse with his shoulders stooped as though under the weight of some crushing burden. Seeing him thus with the tears trickling down his face and his grey beard all spattered with mud, the pain in Nazo's heart became unbearable. She felt so full of it that she was afraid her heart would break. Yes, break into a dozen pieces right there on that very spot where she stood, even as she had heard about hearts doing in the stories her darling uncle used to tell her. And yet she could not cry, even though she wanted to, she could not cry ; and so she slipped her hand, which usually so warm, was now cold as ice, into his and helped her grieving grandfather along. All the while her eyes, big with the horror of it all, were fixed on the limp figure being carried in front of them.

As they walked with their tragic burden, the villagers talked. Softly, for they did not wish Vilayet Ali to hear. But it was loud enough for Nazo's sharp young ears to follow. "He was a good lad," said one of them.

"The brightest that this village has ever seen," said the Headmaster gravely, "I had hoped for great things from him."

"But he failed, didn't he ?" another asked, "isn't that why he took his life ?"

Ahmad, grimly silent, biting into his lips to stop his tears, drew in his breath bitterly as the Headmaster said angrily: "Ali fail ? Didn't I tell you that he was the brightest boy our village has ever had? I went with him to the city this morning to find out the Matriculation results, and do you know," he lifted his lantern so as to see their faces better, "he topped the list of the successful candidates !"

"But then why did he do it ? Why ? Why ? Why ?" they asked in astonishment, looking at each other and sealing side glances at tight-lipped Ahmad and weeping Vilayet Ali. The question seemed to hover in the air and haunt it, so that even the sound of their feet on the slushy ground and the swing of their lanterns seemed to be asking again and yet again : "Why ? Why ? Why ?"

The news of the tragedy had spread throughout the village and, as the pathetic procession wended its sorrowful way home, more and more joined them from the surrounding areas so that both sides of the pathway were lined with wide-eyed onlookers in spite of the unusual hour.

Dawn had all but broken and in its soft light the grim, tired faces of the men, the still burden they carried covered with the coarse piece of home-spun that the barber had thoughtfully brought along, and Vilayet Ali's tragic tear-stained face and bowed shoulders told their own story. As they reached the edge of the village pond, the rich, soul-stirring soundof the *azaan* rose in the morning air. Inspiring and beautiful,the wonderful words echoed and re-echoed in the stillness. Vilayet Ali's tears ceased as he listened and, lifting his sorrow filled face to the skies, he began to murmur softly, resignedly: "It is from Allah that we come and unto Him that we return." The words were taken up by the others all along the way, as slowly the mournful procession neared Vilayet Ali's house where the weeping women waited.

Little Nazo let go of her grandfather's hand and,turning, sped quickly back in the direction from which they had just come. Swiftly and surely she ran and, though her bare feet went deep into the mud at times or into tiny puddles, she did not fall. And, even as she ran, the *azaan* continue endding almost as she reached the tree on which her beloved uncle had hung himself.

Nazo was out of breath when she reached it. And so she sat down and gazed up at the sky, becoming glorious now with the rosy red rays of the rising sun. The pain in her heart was still unbearable, but she knew that since her heart had not broken into pieces a little while ago it never would. Pushing back the damp curls that had fallen on her little forehead, she looked lovingly at Ali's flute, wiping it carefully once again until not a trace of mud remained. And, as she did so, the tears tumbled out at last. Not in torrents, but gently, slowly. And one dropped down right upon the flute. And, with the tears came a little easing of her pain.

Carefully Nazo wiped the tear off the slender reed and pressed it gently to her lips. "I will learn to play it as beautifully as you did," she solemnly told her uncle who was dead. "I will pray to Allah with it even as you did." And gently

she put the flute to her childish rose-bud of a mouth, looked up at the glorious dawn and, with an expression of great reverence upon her delicate little face, began to play. But softly, very, very softly, so as not to hurt her dear grandfather !

THIS LIFE

SYED WALIULLAH

The fearful days passed! Not a wisp of cloud, grey or white, water-laden or smoke-black was to be seen anywhere within the linethat bounds man's sight. The sky, lead-like, dull and vast in emptiness, gave one sometimes a very queer feeling. It appeared to be burning itself out in a mysterious, invisible way melting into nothingness, a void that was abstract and dead; hence incompatible with the present, and one's hopes and despair. When one looked up and watched it, one possibly expected to see ashes falling like rain, noiseless and in a drizzle, silently covering up the fields and homes. The thirsty people here, where the earth was parched and freckled, would have possibly liked to see even ashes falling from the sky, for it would have shown that the sky had not turned impotent after all, that it had not receded higher to a place where their heart-rend:ng prayers could not reach. But the sky seemed to be dead; dead beyond any question. The nights continued to bring in a chain of unending dawns that were not real dawns but appeared to be the huge, dangling tongue of a hanged man, dry and blue, down which not a drop of blood fell; and the nights produced over and over again the same infinite meaningless yawning where millions of stored-up dead souls sparkled mockingly, and with supreme callousness.

The people, who usually scratched up their precarious livelihood from an apparently unwilling soil, had, at the moment, nothing much to do. But, to be sure, that was not a very happy position, even considering their lazy habits. Now

all that they did, night and day, was to watch and scan the sky continuously. Their eyes ached from the monotony of the dazzling brightness; the brightness of the rising vapour, the dying earth's flimsy defeated soul. At nightfall, the dark sky had perhaps a somewhat soothing effect on the tired eyes of the people. But at that time all the stars, which sparkled and danced, became maliciously active, invading their bewildered senses, setting nerves on fire. They could neither avoid them nor help feeling shattered to bits by the continuous, insensate attack of those millions of sharp, pin-pointed stars. Then they fell asleep, tired and exhausted and with the painful feeling of having gone through a day which had cruelly falsified their hopes. Some of them whined which sounded like the slight eddy of the air or the ant rustle of the leaves stirring to a light breeze, and thus startled those who had not yet fallen asleep. The weakest among them perhaps wept in his sleep that was nothing but a brief, tragic phase of unconscious restlessness. By and by the people forgot everything else in the world. Their sleepless, strained eyes smouldered in deep sockets in impotent rage that filled them, and sometimes glistened in a deathless sheen of tearful hopes pitted desperately against the slow but sure advance of the adversary. Sometimes, they were fidgety all the day long. They moved, they kicked, and swore under their breath. They hated each other for absolutely no reason whatsoever, suspected an innocent man as being responsible for this calamity, and then, with all the rage and anger boiling secretly, they would beat their women only because they showed vivid signs of excitement and sorrow. Perhaps they wanted their wives to beat their breasts, scream and wail and thus fill the ominous unbearable stillness with clamour. Then there were moments when they were extremely quiet ; quiet as the cloudless sky. Such moments were, however, very short-lived. For, in no time they would again be falling back into the flutter of anxiety.

They did foolish things too. One afternoon, for instance, a group of them were sitting silent under the great sprawling tree when they spotted a dark, little boy coming flying towards them over the scribble of a path along the rice-fields. They saw him and all of a sudden great expectations rose in their hearts. Their blood began to warm up and flow quickly. Had the boy somehow seen the cloud, perhaps no bigger than

a man's thumb, faintly peeping over the distant horizon? Solemnly they all rose and stood in a mass of silence, limbs motionless, eyes pointed as the tip of an arrow, all ready to receive the great news. The nearer the urchin came, the more shaky became their throbbing, quivering bodies. Presently, he came still nearer and then ran past them without even once looking in their direction. Somebody finally opened his mouth, perhaps to spit in disgust or to swear, but shut it up again.

The village Moulvi, as anxious as the others but with increased faith in the holy utterance that the believer shall be protected, moved about briskly, his blue *lungi* rustling and swishing. He had many words of hope which he distributed freely among his people and was sharp to admonish those who questioned him or whose faces did not sufficiently brighten up on hearing those words which spoke of good days ahead. "What ?" He would shout with anger in his eyes. "No one would live ? Is He not the Merciful, the Creator of Heaven and Earth ? Haven't our people faith in Him ?"

Zuberi, who was until recently a strapping young fellow, would quietly say in reply : "Do not misunderstand us, please. We, the illiterate, dare not say such things. What we ask most respectfully is when does it come, I mean, the rain, and save us from the fearful clutch of death ? We have waited long; too long to have any more patience. But since we are believers, in spite of our monumental ignorance, we have still some patience left to which we are determined to cling so that no harm, may come to our ancestors' souls. Even if we die, we shall die with faith."

His voice had risen to a solemn pitch as he uttered the last sentence.

The old Hussain, who had always great mistrust for the way young men in general spoke and behaved, now came forward and said gravely :

"I beg your pardon, *huzur*, but do not please pay any heed to these irresponsible utterances of the young man who should be ashamed of himself for his audacity to speak before you. The young man's ideas, as we all know, are not yet moulded properly, and he does not understand serious matters. We alone can see beyond our nose, as also both sides of a thing. That is why we understand this very well that we are great

sinners, only fit to be thrown into the deadliest hell, the thought of which is enough to make us tremble all over. Now we have sinned and we are punished for it. All that we can do now is to pray to the Merciful, weep and beg His pardon. This we do not know how to do, for neither our parents, nor our fore-fathers, cared to teach us how to say a word or two to Almighty Allah in times of distress. So we request you to pray to Him on our behalf for His mercy. Tell Him that we are here, many hundred men, facing starvation along with our innocent offsprings. Furthermore, we are extremely poor and have never known what happiness means. But this, you may add, has never stood in the way of our remaining faithful to Him. Whatever sin we might have committed, was committed unwittingly."

Thus spoke the old man and all the people around him felt greatly relieved, and were possibly even happy for a fleeting instant. The Moulvi who had already begun to simmer down was now completely pacified. Still pretending to be angry with them he, however, said in a loud voice that he would pray to God for His mercy and expressed his confident hope that his prayer would not go in vain.

That night the Moulvi read the Holy Quran. His sonorous voice had a peculiar way of rising and falling like the waves on the sea-shore moving back andforth but all the same advancing towards some unknown destination. Sometimes it struck like a sudden gust of wind, and sometimes stretched immeasurably into poignant melody, a mixture of grief and devotion, which brought tears to the eyes of the people. This went on for nights on end, and then one morning the Moulvi called out the folks, and himself standing motionless on staid thin legs covered miserably by the blue *lungi*, said in a solemn voice that the drought, as he understood, was the scourge of God. "I have done my best," he said, "but Allah is still angry with you sinners."

Tears shone in his eyes as he spoke.

The news spread like wild fire, terrifying everybody, filling everybody's heart with utter despair. It also terrified Asiya, Mateen's young wife. She was already in a fix, and it was about the coming baby. She had so far brought forth four sons, of whom two were still alive and by the grace of Allah growing up as nettles grow by a fence. The other two chose to depart fo:

the life beyond, a few weeks after their birth as perhaps they had found this world not quite up to their expectation. All this, however, happened in the course of Asiya's comparatively brief married life and in each case she had excellently risen to the occasion and had nothing to complain. But now the times were not propitious. The scourge of Allah had hit the people. Gradually the rice fields were growing grey and reddish, the spectre of misery, starvation and death loomed large. How could a child be born at such a time ? Not only the child would come to this world under the shadow of a grievous disaster and thus be consigned to lifelong misfortune, but there would be no reception whatsoever, no festivity, no blessing from any quarter. But the child in the womb, which had grown into a sort of bully during its mine months there, now seemed pretty determined to have a look at the world outside and would brook no delay. So Asiya began to pray in her own way and weep and cry.

"Oh Allah," she said, "do not be angry. Whatever we might have done to annoy You, this innocent child has not done anything. Maybe, if it is allowed to grow and live long, it will do some good. As for myself, I am ready to do anything that I may be asked to do, only send me word while I sleep. I dream a lot and there will be no difficulty for You to sneak in and express Your wish, and I give my word that it will be done at all costs. So, O Allah, have mercy on this poor child and give us rain, and give it pretty soon."

Within, the child gave a bold kick. She felt it and whispered in a choked voice :

"Be quiet, my child, you must learn to be respectful while we address ourselves to the Merciful."

But then, without any reason, she began to sob. There was nobody to soothe her sobs.

All her prayers went in vain. The sky did not change and one morning the pain came. As the pain rose, she came inside and after lying down on the straw bed in the dark corner of the room, she said quietly to her mother-in-law :

"The time has come. Will you keep it secret from them ? If your son wants to know what is the trouble with me, tell him I am just sick."

The pain went on increasing. Towards mid-day, somebody from the next village came and told of the death of a man

there. This man was said to have died of starvation. The news spread, and the men, who felt still more helpless, became grim. It was also brought in by the mother-in-law and while listening to it, Asiya's hand twisted and her pale lips tightened over her yellowish teeth. Her pallid face looked ghastly. Later she craned her neck towards the old woman, and asked :

"Where is he ?"

"Sitting outside."

"Has he come to know of this ?"

The old woman hesitated. Then she said :

"Yes. He heard you groan."

While reflecting over it, she bit her lip and then all of a sudden began to sob; not so much for pain as for the feeling of having failed completely to find out a way of meeting the situation. Soon the sobbing was lost in excruciating pain that came rolling and crushing over her aching limbs. When there was a brief lull, she once more craned her unsteady neck towards her mother-in-law and said :

"At least do this for my sake. Hide the baby when it is born. Don't show it to them. Not until there is rain and there is a smile on our folks' faces."

While the old woman pondered over this childish proposition, Asiya broke into hysteric weeping. The old woman shook her wise head in utter despair, and then herself shed a few drops of tears.

Outside, Mateen sat in absolute immobility. A few yards away rested the lean goat chewing perhaps some imaginary cud. Occasionally she jerked her head to drive away a buzzing fly. The lilting sound of the bell round her neck, that rang out over the stillness, disturbed him in a queer way. In the otherwise perfect quietude, Mateen sat still with his head on his palms and brooded. The news that his wife was in labour had somewhat stupefied him. He was at a loss to understand how to take it. Neither the pain that his wife suffered moved him nor the thought of the coming baby cheered him. When he did overcome the shock, he looked up and said to himself, what a time to have a child ! Why, the whole earth was gradually burning itself out and lives of so many people, old and young, were in real danger of cruel starvation. How could a little baby, he pondered,

remove the ever increasing shadow of despair, misery and death that overcast their small sky, and of what value was it to them ? Soon, however, the absence of mental preparedness to welcome the child, who was no doubt a gift from the merciful Allah, began to bite the conscience of the father, but he suffered in silence.

At midnight the child was born. There was then an end to all pain and anguish. But the after-storm calmness brought no happiness to the mind of the infant's mother who seemed to be drifting in a vast, placid sea, aimless, but afraid to near the coast. She stared vaguely in silence at the shadow that had gathered thickly in the corner.

The old woman, who had seen many droughts and floods in her life, went out quietly and told the people what had happened in a voice that had no trace of excitement or mirth, as if she left them the discretion of receiving the news the way they could afford to receive it.

Mateen, who was still sitting with his head on his broad palms, did not stir. After a short while, however, he got up slowly and went inside. There he stood by the side of the bed with his head bent low as if he was standing beside a grave, but the grave of a dear one. Anyway, the baby was there, still immersed in the profound dream of the mysterious world from where it had just come. For a long time the man stared at the little thing and then at his wife who was now hiding her face in what seemed to be an insurmountable shame. As he turned his gaze towards the child, all of a sudden his face beamed; beamed in an exquisite pleasure. He grinned broadly, his eyes twinkling foolishly, and kept shifting on his legs. Then looking particularly at nobody he blurted out—"Yes, I am very glad."

There was no reply. Asiya lay motionless. The heavy silence disturbed the man and he felt somewhat awkward. He could not decide what to say next and his eyes kept on twinkling. Then looking at the child he somehow managed to pluck up courage and say, though this time rather haltingly :

"I am glad that the child has come at the right time. The harvest is burning itself out in front of us all. And this is

the right time for our baby to be born. He must see life from the start, this little man of ours, and, isn't it our life?"

Translated from the original Bengali by the author.

THE ORANGE MIST

JAMILA HASHMI

[*This is an extract from "Aatish-i-Rafta"—The Old Flame, a long short story dealing with Majha, the heart of the Punjab, before it was separated from the mainspring of the Punjab and annexed with the Indian Union.*]

It was when every heart in Lalhran wept for Uttam Singh, and people from all the neighbouring villages poured in to condole his death, and women stood around the dead body weeping and beating their bare breasts, that I saw the wife of Mehr Singh enter our house, wrapped in a shawl, and accompanied by her maid servants. She stood aside for a while, then removed her shawl, pulled her veil down, and joined the mourners.

The whole of Maharajpur had come with my mother's family. Wives and daughters of the Sardars of Dhianpura and *supariwand* had also gathered in my grandmother's courtyard.

Chinti had been sent to Vesu's house to play with his little sister.

My grandmother did not cry at all. She sat still by my father's side. But every now and then she would wring her hands in despair and say :

"Uttam Singh, my son, where am I to go now?"

At times she was angry with the women.

"Why do you cry thus in my house ? You make such a noise. Let my son sleep."

My mother had fainted. She lay unconscious at my

father's feet, her lips white and parched. But no one paid any attention to her.

Then I saw my father's uncle, Chanan Singh, enter the house. With him was my uncle, Shamsher Singh. They were not wearing their turbans.

It was late in the day and Uttam Singh had to be carried to the *shamshan.* He lay there covered with a white sheet from head to foot. Then they lifted his big body up, and took him to the *shamshan.*

On the roads of Lalhran, women stood in groups wailing and beating their breasts.

My father did not know how many people had gathered there in his honour.

They were not there when he had come home after the aquittal. Uttam Singh had been convicted for the murder of his father Anoop Singh and his woman Bhago. He had admitted his guilt in the court. But as there were no witnesses to support the charge, the judge aquitted him. People of the Dhianpura village had gone with my grandmother to receive him. Lalhran was quiet and aloof. Uttam Singh walked home, choked with garlands. His moustaches were neatly twirled and his eyes were heavy with the thought of his victory. Grandmother looked tall and proud. Her *kirpan* seemed to have grown longer.

That day, I do not remember seeing the wife of Mehr Singh in our house. Mehr Singh sat in his living room, surrounded by other Sardars of the community, as though lamenting the death of a dear one. Then he rode to the big city.

His white mare trotted up and down the dusty road until one day my father was carried into my grandmother's courtyard—limp and lifeless.

It is perhaps natural for the community to become more actively interested in one's affairs when one is in trouble. After all, it understands its responsibilities. It was for this reason, most probably, that Mehr Singh came to the ceremony of my succession. I could see that my uncles were angry but they could not question his presence. Uncle Chanan Singh, in fact, asked my grandmother to be more compromising. "You are too weak at the moment to stand up against the community. You must wait for your grandson to grow up. Then it will be time to think of revenge," he said.

Grandmother would not hear of it in the beginning. "What are you saying, brother ?" she protested. "It is impossible for me to forgive Mehr Singh. I will have my revenge even if I am reduced to ashes in the process. Did he not know how unhappy I had been made by Anoop Singh ? How could he be so heartless as to take my son away from me ? I do not need the community. I can work with my own two hands."

But uncle Chanan Singh was eventually successful in pacifying her. The two families were reconciled. Chinti and Kuldeep Kaur, Mehr Singh's younger daughter, became the closest of friends.

* * * *

At home Kuldeep Kaur was called Deepo and was pampered a great deal by her father and her brothers. She had long hair, and I still remember her as a pink, wide-eyed girl. Whenever she married her *guria* (female doll) to Chinti's *gudda* (male doll), I acted as the bride's father. I carried her *guria* to our house, and performed the traditional ceremony of throwing coins over the bride's *doli*.

Deepo was as old as my sister Chinti. I was a year junior to them and Mehr Singh's wife called me *kaka* (little boy). When Chinti introduced me to her as 'Brother Dildar Singh' she had a good laugh. Deepo looked around and enquired wickedly: "Where is he ?"

Chinti was embarrassed.

I could not play with the girls very often. In the dim light of the morning star, I set out for the fields with my grandmother. In the evening when I returned, I was too tired even for my meal. Usually my mother had to wake me up and force a glass of milk down my throat.

* * * *

One year, I remember, we had a heavy rainfall. Black clouds would sway across the sky every day. In the village, many roofs collapsed and many mud walls melted away in the downpour. The big canal was beginning to throw its water over the edges.

All over the village of Lalhran, young girls were singing and swinging. Their *dupattas* were dyed in all the seven colours of the rainbow.

In the courtyard, under the *neem* tree, the breath of wind was intoxicating.

Chinti had invited her friends over, she had put her swing on the *peepal* tree in our backyard. Deepo was also there. She wore a *dupatta* decorated with red and green stripes. But poor girl, as she raised her swing, her long black plait was caught in the rope. Chinti, her friend Balbir, my mother, all tried their best to untangle her but without success. I was sent home on an errand by grandmother. As I entered the house, with my *dhoti* tucked up and my feet deep in mud, I saw Deepo perched up the swing, sobbing bitterly, and her friends standing around in a daze.

My help was instantly sought. I went up to her and started working out the knots. We were so close that I could feel her breath on my face. What kind of fragrance was it ? I wondered. There was the smell of the earth after the first rainfall ; and there was the smell of the ripe corn, and the wet rice fields; and then there was the hot smell of the cane juice, while it was being cooked into *gur*. But none of them had such sweetness.

This was different. Different and strange.

I breathed it in and felt a queer warmth along my blood.

I did not look at her but I could feel her eyes on me. As I undid every knot, I felt her joy through my finger tips. The increasing fragrance of her breath was beginning to choke me. When I undid the last knot I heard, her say: "Thank God," and I saw her pink feet jump off the swing.

I believe to this day that there is a fragrance which flows from a woman to a man. And that the beauty that is in her unfolds itself to one man alone and only once. And then the thought of her deep dark eyes, her bronze complexion and her black silken hair, makes him sad for the rest of his days. This teasing pain shoots along his blood despite the honour of his family, despite his grandmother, and despite his pledge. The strange smell haunts him all his life and follows him to the *shamshan* and beyond.

When I returned to the fields that day, I did not notice the swamps. I was running with a heart as light as a feather. I seemed to have grown wings. I wanted to sing and I wanted to laugh with all the strength of my inside.

* * * *

At the village fair, Chinti and Deepo wore similar *dupattas* and flitted around like a pair of happy birds. The daughters

of the Sardars of Lalhran wore bright dresses, and their hands and feet were red with the colour of *henna*. They had dyed their *dupattas* in deep colours and together they looked like a seven-hued kite that had descended from the sky. There were some newly-wed brides who had drawn their veils over their foreheads and who walked like peacocks. Young married girls, who had returned to their parents' homes, looked gay and care-free and teased one another in whispers and laughed a suppressed laughter.

There were little boys tugging at their sisters' *dupattas* and demanding all kinds of things. Men were not supposed to walk that way. Some young boys, while grazing their buffalos in the green pastures around the village, had climbed up little hillocks to have a look at the fair.

Now the rains were over and the sun came out of the clouds and warmed the earth. Young women were perspiring in their heavy dresses and were cooling themselves with fans studded with little bells. Thick black clouds had turned to smoky flakes and were eventually blown off by the cool breeze.

One afternoon, Chinti came home with a long face. I had pricked my foot and had stayed at home that day. She was not accompanied by Deepo or by Balbir.

"What is the matter with you, Chinti?" my mother asked. "Have you fought with Deepo?"

Chinti ignored mother's question. Instead she turned to me and asked in a blank voice: "Brother, tell me, was it Deepo's father who got my father hanged?"

I felt suffocated and stared at her helplessly.

"I had a fight with Balbir today," she said. "She asked me not to talk to her or to Deepo. She told me that I could never be Deepo's friend if I had any self-respect. Tell me, brother, is it true? If Mehr Singh has had my father killed, I swear I will give up Deepo, however much I love her."

I looked at her and then I looked at my mother, and then from the mist of the past emerged those lurking shadows. I remembered my father, the prison-house, the weeping, the mourning. I heard my grandmother say: "I will have my revenge on Mehr Singh even if I am reduced to ashes in the process." I heard my father declare: "A woman for a woman."

"Tell me mother," Chinti insisted again, "is it true?"

My mother began to weep aloud. I felt unhinged. Chinti

did not know what to do.

Deepo came to our house after many days. Chinti was indifferent to her. I was angry with Chinti. Why could she not understand that it was not Deepo's fault? Then I heard my grandmother, her voice sounded as though it came through a stone wall.

"Chinti, why don't you talk to your friend. She has come all the way to see you."

Chinti was forced to reconcile but it could never be the same between the two. Their laughter, that once echoed through the house, was no longer heard. Chinti now most of the time helped my mother at the loom or, whenever free, oiled and combed grandmother's hair. She looked grown up all of a sudden.

She never visited Deepo's house again, however much Deepo insisted.

I do not know why but grandmother always talked of Deepo with great enthusiasm. I could never understand whether I was supposed to participate in it or not. But the topic always made me painfully uneasy and I felt the tips of my ears burn. It was during these days that we heard that Sardar Mehr Singh was sending Deepo to the big city for her education. Deepo's brothers were already studying there. My grandmother and my mother sneered at the idea. Then it was said that a foreign woman was coming to Lalhran to educate Deepo. The community objected to this arrangement as well, and predicted that the foreign woman, not before long, would replace Sardar Mehr Singh's wife, and that Sardar Mehr Singh's wife would not be able to endure the shock as bravely as Anoop Singh's wife had done.

These rumours continued to interest the village until the end of summer. Crops were now coming up. In the fields the trees were half sunk in this living, growing, flood of green.

And then one evening, when I was chopping fodder for the cow and grandmother was preparing the little oil lamp, and mother was cooking *chapatis*, and the house was filled with the stinging smoke of wet wood and dung cakes, and Chinti was pouring a glass of milk from the big earthen jar for Gianiji I heard the quack quack of our ducks. Deepo stood in the door-way, scared. She was wearing *dupatta* of thin muslin with a green border. I had seen her after a year. She looked quite

changed. She looked like a soft, flexible branch of a young mango tree. She blushed when she saw me. Or perhaps it was the flush of twilight which was still seeping through darkness towards the cool, wet earth.

I heard my grandmother say: "Dildar Singh, help Kuldeep come in; the passage is slippery and soft. There has never been such an untimely rain."

Deepo almost slipped into the mire. I led her by the hand into the room, and called out: "Here, Chinti, I have dragged your friend out of the swamp with great difficulty," and then went back to chop the fodder. When grandmother asked me to have my dinner, I saw that Chinti and Deepo were still sitting together. They were facing the little lamp. In the dim flickering light of the red flame, Deepo's hair looked of rich gold. The smile in her eyes made me sad. On her face there was a fragrance that was heavy with joy, and that, every now and then, seemed to spread out from the corners of her lips. My mother helped me wash my hands and then she put my meal before me. I felt Deepo's eyes on my back like the touch of hot iron. It made me strangely inert and defenceless.

Then I heard Deepo say good-bye. She was leaving after all for the big city with her brother. Grandmother blessed her and said it was good to receive education. How would one be able to read the Holy Book otherwise.

* * * *

It was when we were harvesting, and I was working in the fields day and night with grandmother, that Deepo's letter to Chinti arrived. In the evening when I came home with grandmother, with an aching back and tired feet, Chinti handed the letter to me. She could not understand what it was.

I knew it instinctively. The thought of Deepo came to me through the blue mist of the evening. My heart made such a noise.

I went to Gianiji with the usual glass of milk. There were two other men sitting with him.

"Is this Uttam Singh's son Dildar Singh?" they enquired of him.

"He is a young man now. Must be a great help to his grandmother." Gianiji praised me for my examplary obedience to my mother and my grandmother. When these two men left, I asked Gianiji to read the paper to me. He told

me it was a letter from Kuldeep Kaur to Chinti Kaur. It said that Kuldeep Kaur was well and was hoping to come home during the vacations. It ended with regards to all at home.

I thought I saw the little lamp growing into a big round moon. I had strange visions of distant lands. I felt new energy in me, new strength in my limbs. I took the letter and came back home almost running. I told Chinti it was Deepo's letter.

"Have you been running, Dildar Singh ? You seem out of breath," grandmother said. "A dog ran after me on the road." I could not think of a better excuse.

"Scared by a dog ?" Chinti teased. "It could have been a mad dog."

"And stop whinnying like a horse," I snapped. That day as we were ploughing the fields for a fresh crop of wheat, two beautiful mares entered the village of Lalhran. My grandmother saw them, screwing her eyes up and shading them with her hand, and said: "It is someone from Mehr Singh's house." In Lalhran, in fact in the whole of Majha, white mares were owned either by Anoop Singh or by Mehr Singh.

And then she gave me a searching glance. I felt uneasy and turned my face away. She went back to work, as though Deepo's arrival did not matter.

* * * *

In the air there was the scent of the mango flower, and of the freshly planted wheat. The earth around the big canal was damp and cool. The sound of the water wheel seemed to me the ultimate harmony. There was a cloud of dust along the road. It looked golden in the light of the setting sun. People were bringing their cattle home, and were singing *mahiya*. Their voices were gathered up in the golden dust and the floating mist of the evening and were carried upwards until they faded out completely. The stillness of the night stood in the midst of the orange sun.

It was on such a day, when dinner was over and the lamp had been put off, that my grandmother said to me:

"How will it happen, Dildar Singh ?"

"What grandmother ?" I asked, my inside numb with fear.

"How will your father be avenged ? You are a young

man now. How long am I to walk in Lalhran with my head lowered, and listen to what people say. Have you thought of anything ?"

"I will grandmother," I said. That night I did not sleep well. I had strange dreams and woke up with a dry throat and a sort of emptiness inside me.

Deepo had returned to Lalhran. And I was not feeling quite well. What was happening to me after all ? There was a restlessness in my soul which I could not control.

I knew Deepo would be coming to see Chinti. The next day, while grandmother was busy talking to a dealer, I made up some kind of an excuse and went home. Deepo was sitting there alone.

"Hello, where is Chinti ?" I asked.

"I have just come," she said. "Chinti must have gone to Balbir's house. I have sent the maid servant for her."

"I remember you had a fight with Balbir. Are you friends again ?"

Deepo blushed. "That was years ago."

Then Chinti and Balbir came in . Chinti greeted Deepo. They really seemed happy to be together once again.

"What are you doing here at this time, brother ?" Chinti asked me. She was surprised to see me at such an early hour.

"Can I have my father's scythe, Chinti ?" I said.

Chinti was quiet and Deepo turned pale.

"Dildar Singh, harvest is over. My father has put all his scythes away. What do you need one for ?" Balbir said. And then Chinti and Balbir went into the store to look for the scythe. I was left alone with Deepo. She sat still, as though there was no life in her.

I noticed that in these few months her eyes had grown wider. Her hair looked more bright, the kind of brightness you see on a rich, ripened mango. She was wearing beautiful slippers and her pink heels looked nice in them. Her eyelashes, fallen over her pale face, looked like little flakes of cool, black clouds, afloat.

"Hurry up, Chinti, I have to go," I called out.

We are such dissemblers, I thought, for I did not really want to go.

"Here it is, brother," Chinti handed the scythe to me.

There were tears in her eyes. She looked angry and hurt.

She did not meet Deepo after that day. What we had already endured and survived, was now coming to life for Chinti. She was ominously quiet, weaving at the loom or making baskets. If ever her friends dragged her out, she went as though without her will. She did not talk or laugh much. If ever they questioned her about Deepo, she said she had fought with her over a trifle, and that nothing was really the matter. During those days, I remember, every night, before I went to bed, grandmother put the question to me: "Have you thought anything Dildar Singh ?"

"I will, grandmother," I would say. There is still a life-time to settle the account, I secretly thought. When I started meeting Deepo on the sly, it was already summer. While boys of my age teased one another, drank stolen liquor, bragged and talked of things that had the taste of sour mangoes, I set out every evening possessed by one thought alone.

At the back of Mehr Singh's house there was an orchard and we usually met there. I still remember that every time I stepped into it, I felt intoxicated by the mixed fragrance of guavas and mangoes.

I knew that I was following my dreams into the very heart of danger. If Mehr Singh had found out, he would have chopped me down to pieces with his heavy axe, and that would have left my mother and grandmother alone in their effort for survival. Besides, I had my pledge to keep, so that we could walk with our heads high in the streets of Lalhran. I had to convince my mother, my grandmother, and above all, my sister Chinti, of my valour. But I also wanted to protect my dreams. At night I felt there was one little lamp that lighted my way.

I wanted to guard its tiny flame or else I knew I would be doomed to live in darkness all my life; a darkness more closed than death itself.

I knew I was being watched by my grandmother. She would smell my shirt, my hair. She wanted to know something. Her eyes seemed to look for some assurance, some hope.

When I came back from the orchard, I could not sleep. My bones ached. Something seemed to hiss along my heart and then creep far into me. This strangely desirable anguish made

me restless.

Deepo always came wrapped in a thick, red, handloom shawl.

Now that she is no more, I think of the foolish things we talked about. Standing bare foot on rich, cool herbage, we talked mostly of grandmother and Chinti.

"I like Chinti very much," she would say. "I love her too. I could do anything for her."

"She is almost like a daughter to me," I would say.

"I did not know you were a father," she laughed and said, and then added quietly: "Chinti is a lucky girl."

"Not more than you," I assured her. "But I would like to do whatever I can for her."

"That is what makes her so lucky," she would say wistfully.

"Why don't you start studying, Dildar ?" she asked me once. The question somehow hurt me.

"Why should I become a city *baboo*?" I snapped back.

Time passed. Chinti was now married. We felt relieved, but it was lonelier in the house without her. I saw that my mother, in a few years time, looked older than all the other women of her age. My grandmother too looked old and shrivelled. She worked very hard and I never saw her gossiping like other women. She watched me and looked to me for assurance.

Our house seemed to await something silently. My marriage was never discussed.

It was eternally like the hour of death ticking towards the last, crucial moment.

On long winter nights, after watering the fields, when I entered the orchard, Deepo came there all by herself, and for a moment, I felt choked with fear.

She would stand there, leaning against a tree, laughing and talking, and I saw the flash of her white teeth and the brightness that was in her eyes. And then I gave myself up to the spell of the moment and stopped asking questions.

I trusted Deepo, and was happy. Nothing else seemed to matter. During those days I wanted to laugh all the time. I remember my liveliness surprised my friends at times.

I felt I had the energy of ten men, and worked harder than ever. I seemed to have grown a stranger to fear, mistrust

THE MAN WHO WAS YESTERDAY

OMAR ALI CHAUDHURY

With gentle, rosy fingers, dawn touched the mystic city of Karachi, shuddered at the sight of Frere Hall, and woke Rashid, who lay sprawled on a bench. As he awoke, his first thought was that he had broken the law by stealing into the gardens after midnight and sleeping on a bench. His next was to escape before the attendant should arrive on the scene. But the attendant was busy attending to his own affairs. His wife was unwell, his son refused to go to school, and he had a tooth-ache. He had noticed the figure clad in a blue suit curled up on a bench under the unseeing eyes of Queen Victoria. It would have been easy to rouse him and send him away, but in a spirit of generosity he had refrained from disturbing the blue, sinister figure. The groans of his ailing wife made him withdraw his head from the window and shout to his son to get dressed and ready for school.

Rashid held his head in both hands and stretched his legs until he felt something inside them would snap. His clothes were damp, the dew had soaked into them during the night, and his shoes oozed muddy water. He got up, pulled his coat down, and walked across to King Edward, under whose vacant stare he sat down with an air of having lately arrived at the gardens. All this the attendant observed from his window without being impressed. His tooth ached and his wife groaned. Another tiresome day had begun.

Rashid walked away, not knowing where to go. He crossed Victoria Road and was narrowly missed by a diplomatic car, which sped past him on some early mission. The flag

of a Middle Eastern country waved briefly in the morning breeze, and then the black limousine swerved smartly round the policeman and drew up outside the Hotel Metropole.

He walked along Victoria Road despondently, playing with the few silver rupees which jingled in his trouser pocket, thinking of nothing save breakfast—a cup of hot tea and something to eat. But where ? At once the sharp memories of the previous night struck his brain like angry hammers. Then suddenly his mind was a blank, except for the thought of breakfast. What he had done the previous night was there in his mind, stored carefully away. It could not be forgotten; but it was not, like other memories, ever present, ever intrusive, unsparing and cruel. It could wait and emerge when time called it forth, like a prompter, to confront the culprit with his deed. Not now, not yet, after breakfast perhaps, or even later, for what lay in the future, except the companionship of this memory ?

He reached Ilaco House and thought of going into the cafe opposite. It was too early ; the Irani tea-shops would be open though. He walked on. "Rashid !" a voice shouted from across the street. He hesitated, then turned his face towards a shop-window. It was impossible to see in the reflection who it was, standing on the opposite side of the street, waving his arms and calling : "Rashid !" He hurried away, and after a few paces, looked round quicky. There was nobody there.

Outside the Paradise Cinema a man was selling newspapers. Shall I ? He thought. No! Why release those little demons with their angry hammers ? There is enough time. How can I escape ? Shall I jump on a train and go somewhere, anywhere ? I could never go far enough ; I could only elude them for a while, and even if forever, could I escape from myself ? I would always be alone with that face.

On Frere Road he found a tea-shop. Inside, the noise was comforting. One thing, he suddenly thought—how did I come to spend the night in Frere Gardens? His splitting head bore witness to the fact that when he got there, he must have been very drunk. But why not the hotel ? Fear, he concluded, fear that his face might have given something, everything, away.

"Tea," he said to the impatient waiter, already shouting someone else's order to the din and clamour of the kitchen, "bread and butter and cakes, quickly !" He ate in silence. One by one a few ofthe demonse mergedf rom the dark, at the back of his mind, as his jaws worked, chewing the thick, coarse bread, smeared with a pale, rancid butter. The stale cakes, with their pink and yellow backs, ribbed with smudgy lines of cream, were repulsive ; and the flies seemed to stick to them. He thought : first of all the bar. That's where I met him. The waiter warned me to be careful. He was carrying a load of drink. I had seen him before, in other bars. That oily face, and those sneering lips ; those cold eyes, small,and stitched like buttons into hollow sockets. The memory of those small eyes opened wide in terror caused him to shake. The hot tea scorched his throat. Where did it happen ? Memory came to his assistance, swiftly, expertly, like a nurse at an operation—here is the knife, doctor, open the wound, insert it, twist, twist ! Ah yes, there....Rashid's eyes bulged, and he shouted :

"More tea !"

Slowly he dragged himself up the stairs of his cheap hotel in the Saddar. He opened the door of his room. There was a little whisky left at the bottom of a bottle in the cupboard. He poured it down his throat, and looked under his last remaining clean shirt. Three orange notes. Enough, he thought for today, for ever. Latif, the hotel servant, thrust his pimply face through the door :

"*Salam sah'b.* Will you have breakfast ?"

"No Latif. Take this ten rupee note. When the liquor shop opens, buy a small bottle of rum, three packets of Capstan cigarettes and a box of matches. Do not disturb me till then."

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. I'm tired, he thought, so tired. Is he tired, anymore ? Where is he ? No, he screamed as the knife prepared to twist, no, I refuse to know, I refuse to see it again in here ! Please leave me alone, he sobbed, take away that face ! The room darkened, his head swam, lights began to dance before his eyes. He was at the Exhibition again; the gate opened, and he was being pushed in. "Try your strength," a voice said. He turned away. There was the man with the ingratiating voice : "Come and consult The Man Who Was Yesterday." His mouth opened

wider and wider, his voice became shrill and Rashid was being pushed towards him by the crowd. "Come and ask him your question," he screamed, and stretched forward to catch Rashid's arm. His staring eyes were small, and his lips were twisted in a sneer. "It's you," Rashid yelled, writhing on the bed, "don't touch me, don't...."

"Ha ha ha," the man shrieked, and Rashid was pushed towards another tent, the lights began to dance. "Come on, come on," a voice shouted. "You, young man, come up here. The Man Who Will Be Tomorrow would like to ask you a question and you can ask him one too." His long arm came forward towards Rashid. His eyes, like two closely sewn buttons, gleamed, and his lips were set in a sneer. His oily face glistened in the harsh fluorescent light. Rashid stared at his face with horror. It was like an enormous blister in that vivid light.

"Ask the Man Who Will Be Tomorrow any question, he will answer. Come, now your fate," the voice insisted.

"And yours?" Rashid screamed. "Have you asked about yours ?"

"That," the face sneered, "is known to the Man Who Was Yesterday."

Rashid was carried away by the crowd who was cheering and laughing. Fire-works burst suddenly in the ink-black sky. The blinding flash woke Rashid who sat up in bed soaked in perspiration. Where am I, he thought, rubbing a damp hand across his forehead. Slowly he recognised the room. He turned round and looked out of the window. It was almost dark. Latif knocked and looked in through the door-way.

"Each time I tried to wake you," he said, "you told me to get out. It's past six now. You have been sleeping for over nine hours !"

"I know," Rashid breathed, still rubbing his forehead. "It was very strange. I must not think about it."

"What was strange ?" Latif enquired, puzzled.

"Never mind. Bring me some drinking water."

Latif remarked to the servants who were drinking tea and smoking in the kitchen: "He's muttering away. I heard him say in his sleep' 'Are you really the Man Who Will Be Tomorrow ? If so, tell me why the star fell so close.'" The servants were amused by this, and laughed.

Rashid groaned and lurched across to the table. He poured out a stiff drink and gulped it down. Lighting a cigarette, he stood on the balcony and watched the traffic below.

I am alone, he thought, there is a round, oily face watching me, always. An oily face, with a pair of small gleaming eyes, that opened wide with terror when....when....he walked inside the room and poured out another drink. I must not think of that now. He sat on the bed and picked up a novel he had been reading. The title on the jacket was indistinct in the darkening room : Crime And Punishment by Dostoevsky. He flung it across the room and poured out another drink. The pint bottle was almost empty. Outside, it was quite dark. I must go out, he thought, putting on the light. He changed his shirt, put on a pair of brown trousers, and tied a scarf around his neck. Then he finished the remainder of the rum.

Rashid walked quickly along Frere Road. On the left was a bar, and he went in. The waiter, who knew what he drank, brought him a large whisky and poured into it a cold soda.

"How are you feeling now ?" the waiter asked intimately, with mock concern. "Last night you came in just before we closed, looking very ill."

"Did I?" Rashid shouted. "Well, mind your own damned business." He swallowed his drink, left the exact amount on the table, and walked out.

"What's the matter with him ?" the waiter muttered. "Must have been drinking the whole day." And shrugging his shoulders he began to wipe the table.

Rashid walked along Frere Road, cursing. Suspicious, they're all so suspicious. Wasn't I in that bar earlier ? If not, then where ? Suddenly he jumped into a bus. It rattled, the light winked, the conductor kept shouting, and a fat man, who smelt horribly, squeezed into the seat beside him and began smoking a *bidi*. Rashid's head felt as though it would burst. He got out at Bunder Road. The pavements were crowded with people. What is the use of them, he wondered. They go on living for no reason at all. How merciful it would be to exterminate them. These refugees ; all this human filth. He walked to a familiar bar. It was full and the atmosphere was cheerful. He gulped down his drink

and paid the bill. He could hardly see anything as he emerged from the dark entrance and collided with a policeman.

"What's the matter with you ?" the policeman asked. "Had too much to drink ?"

"No," Rashid replied, afraid. "Tell me," he asked, seriously, "do you think that I am mad ?"

"Get along with you," the policeman said, resuming his measured walk along the pavement.

Rashid stood on Bunder Road. A tram came round the corner with a scream, like a stricken animal ; the lamps flickered like candles which would presently gutter and leave him in the dark which he so violently feared. A rickshaw screeched to a halt in front of him. He got in and said : "Saddar."

I must find out which bar it was. And as they drove along Bunder Road, he thought of his childhood. Quite suddenly a host of memories came flapping out of the past like scared birds which a gun shot had disturbed. He saw his mother weeping after his sister had died. He saw himself returning home from school with a sprained ankle. His father said : "Rashid, the servant reports that he caught you smoking in the bathroom." The memories flapped out of sight, and he was back in the rickshaw. Once again there was a man outside the Paradise Cinema selling newspapers. He paid the rickshaw driver and bought one. Then he walked into the bar.

As he sat down and ordered a whisky, the whole scene came back. Each and every object was minutely recognisable. Ah yes, he thought somberly. How could I forget? In fact, it was sobriety which robbed him of his faculties. Now that he was drunk again, he was familiar with the past. At the table behind him, two men were discussing what they had read in the newspaper. "The body was found in a ditch. Complete description of the killer. They don't mention the bar, but the police should find him in on time."

The lights began to dance. Not the Exhibition again, Rashid groaned. Fireworks burst in the sky. "You have started smoking," his father said. "Your sister is dead," his mother reported simply. "I will not let you touch my bat," and he struck Riaz across the face. "I hate you. I hate everybody."

He ordered another whisky. "Bearer," he added,

"bring me a packet of Capstan." It was Craven A he used to steal from his father's tin. If only I could go back, he thought, back to those happy days. But it was too late.

He opened his eyes, and saw the Manager coming towards his table with two police officers. All the bearers were staring at him. Some were pointing. Never mind, he thought, I have't got a driving licence, what can they do to me ? Suddenly the demons jabbed, the knife twisted, the oily face re-appeared. He was asking a policeman on Bunder Road : "Tell me, do you think that I am mad ?" The lights danced. He began to sink downwards through a multi-coloured haze. Someone shook him by the shoulder. He opened his eyes.

"Is this the man ?" he heared one of the police officers asking.

"Yes!" the Manager replied.

Rashid stretched out his hand, to grip the throat of the Man Who Was Yesterday, who stood there sneering at him, glaring violently through two small, button-like eyes.

"You are under arrest," the police officer said to Rashid.

"What for ?" he asked, weakly.

"Murder !"

THE NEW ESTATE

SYED MAHBUBUR REHMAN

By a sudden reverse of fortune the landlord family of Niamatpur had to leave the village associated in their memories for a long time. Nasim Choudhury, the last descendant of the family, was young in years, and proportionate to his age had less experience of life. He took his M.A. degree, married a young girl in a rich family of the city, and brought her home. His young wife did not like the village ; the din and bustle, the festivities, the lively activities, the grandeur and pageantry of town life she did not find there. Her time did not pass well in its unceasing monotony. Her mind growing restive, Jotsna Choudhury complained to her husband that it was not only impossible for her to live so very lonely in the society of poverty-stricken neighbours, but she also expressed the fear that if she continued to live such a life for a long time, her health would give way. As she was brooding over it, her fear and anxiety grew. But Nasim Choudhury's mind refused to leave the village. His heart and soul, his bone and marrow, was so intimately connected with rural life that the very thought of leaving his village frightened him.

Yet he had to abandon his village-home. With great reluctance, he betook himself to the city. It was not that he did not sympathise with his wife's wishes, but that there was a cause which compelled him to give up his fascinating love for rural society. When the State acquired his property,

his family fell into great hardship. The income from the estate was the main source of their livelihood, and as the source of income suddenly disappeared, he found it hard to keep up the honour and prestige, the social status and tradition of his family. Had the Government, however, paid the compensation immediately, Nasim Choudhury might have clung to the village and its simple, unostentatious life. Want and poverty on the one hand, and his wife's aversion to rural society on the other, made the situation worse for him.

The villagers gathered and bade farewell to Nasim Choudhury, who reciprocated with tears rolling down his eyes. "I'll never forget you, my good neighbours," he said. "The moment I'll have the opportunity, I'll come to see you. I feel my heart heavy with sorrow and pity as I have been forced by sheer helpless circumstances to bid good-bye to my ancestral home." His voice stuck in the throat with a gust of overflowing emotions.

Nasim Choudhury obtained a teaching job in a countryside college. His wife also went to live with him. There too she felt indisposed to stay.

"I have passed my whole life from infancy till now in the big city," she said sorrowfully to her husband. "The people of the city, its houses and mansions, its air and light —its entire modern environment, exerted an influence on me. Now regardless of this influence, if I live in this lifeless rural township, I am afraid I'll go mad."

With his broad sympathy, Nasim Choudhury perceived the mental anguish of his beloved wife.

Severely shocked at the loss of his estate, Nasim Choudhury could not reconcile himself to its aftermath. Coming of an aristocratic family, he was keenly conscious of its honour and position and his offsprings too would have to keep up the tradition. So he made up his mind to build up an alternative estate : he would erect a palatial building in the metropolis of Dacca and forget his sorrow over the loss of his old landlordism. Jotsna rejoiced in his decision and resolution, and this enhanced her love and attachment for him hundredfold.

When, during the vacations Nasim Choudhury came to Dacca for a sojourn, he practically laid the foundation of the new estate. With his wife he wandered about the streets,

lanes and by-lanes of the city and its open, unoccupied spaces, having at last chosen half an acre of vacant land, a very nice plot open in three directions and in good surroundings. This was gentry's colony, except for the slums on one side. To the west was a small pond with a dilapidated temple on its bank. Nasim Choudhury bought the piece of land very cheap from an evacuee Hindu. Both the husband and the wife were filled with immense pleasure on that day, because even by selling it at that stage they would gain seven to eight thousand rupees in profits. Of course, they were not going to sell it. On it a big brick building would raise its head in the sky, making them forget the irreparable loss of their estate as they would glimpse its view.

Nasim Choudhury was short of money. In buying the land he contracted a debt. It was possible by the sacrifice and enthusiasm of Jotsna to achieve this impossible end, for she had ungrudgingly given away her ornaments worth five thousand rupees—all presents from her parents, which he pawned in the bank against the money he borrowed. He was charmed by the virtues of his lucky wife. So long this extraordinary gift of hers was quite unknown to him, and now he understood that his wife's good luck gave him the new estate. To his friends and acquaintances he went about speaking very appreciatively of the wisdom with which Jotsna was endowed. Everywhere his language glowed with praises and admiration for her.

After the purchase of the land, there cropped up a problem very difficult to solve. He was in service on a small salary. He was without a single farthing in his purse. The small earnings that he had laid by were spent to the last farthing on the building site. Jotsna insisted that she would not leave Dacca until the house had been built. She was firm in her determination ; she would not brook obstacles. The building must be constructed at any cost. Want of money ? Yes, Nasim was right, but she should not mind it, because sitting idle would not solve the problem. She saw no cause for worrying, for the Government House Building Corporation was there to help. When the other people built houses and earned thousands of rupees by letting them on rent, it was folly to talk of pecuniary difficulties and not to undertake the venture. It was cowardice as well.

"You are worthless," she said to his face. "Go to your job, and you will find that the new estate as desired by you is coming into being."

Nasim Choudhury was pleased. Jotsna's self-confidence was really praise-worthy. Being re-assured, he was beside himself with the dream of the new estate, and he fancied that she was right, because no great object could be attained without such frenzied enthusiasm. The man who, among his ancestors, had first founded their landed estate, might have been as zealous as she was. He regarded himself as very fortunate, for had it not been so, such a brave and brilliant wife would not have fallen to his lot. With a feeling of self satisfaction, he left for his college in the country-side. He hoped for a rainbow.

The plan for a four storeyed building was prepared for her by an expert engineer. The mansion, on half an acre of land, shooting its head high into the sky, would look grand and imposing and draw attention from a distance. In that part of the city, it would be the tallest and biggest building. She liked the plan very much and informed Nasim that she was going to start construction very shortly. She had personally called at the offices of the Department of Communications and Buildings and the Municipality and got the plan readily approved. She also arranged money from the House Building Corporation. But the building site posed a difficulty ; a dispute having cropped up over the strip of land near the temple situated on the pond side. Sanatan Thakur, the priest of the temple, claimed that strip and said that the Hindu evacuees had made illegal transfer of his title.

Jotsna was in a great fix. Sanatan Thakur was a tartar ; he would not part with the narrow piece of land at any event. He was even prepared to go to the length of fighting for it in the courts. Her friends and relatives insisted that the house should be built on the available site, excluding the disputed strip. But that would spoil the beauty of the plan and destroy the speciality of the building. In fact it was this strip of land which she required badly to make the edifice beautiful and commodious. Jotsna too became hardened in her resolve ; she would not allow the plan to be mutilated. As she thought so, her heart shook with an undefined fear. She had bought the land for money. Then why should she

beat a retreat if Sanatan Thakur tried to dispossess her wrongfully ?

For the time being the construction of the builing was held in abeyance.

Jotsna's father was a man of substance, a well-known contractor. Her brothers were in business. They owned seven or eight big houses in the city and earned thousands of rupees every month in rent. Their residence was full of people—servants, maids, workers, and labourers. Her father forcefully occupied many plots of land by sheer man-power and then bought them for a pittance. Besides, she had many influential persons among her relatives. If necessary she would get help from them too. She did not care a pin for a priest like Sanatan Thakur. As she pondered she began to heave with an out burst of rage.

Jotsna, however, did not venture to violate the law. It was good, she thought, to consult an experienced lawyer about the titles, terms and conditions of the transfer deed.

On receipt of Jotsna's letter, Nasim Choudhury came down in a haste for some days. There was no time for rest and the construction work must be taken in hand in these few days. In the morning they sat at a discussion in which two young men from outside also took part. Nasim had never seen them before and did not like them to participate in their absolutely private talk. What Jotsna guessed, after taking a look at her husband's face, was not quite clear. "They will help us to occupy the land," she uttered enthusiastically.

One of the young men stared with a sort of suspicion at Nasim Choudhury.

"Well, Mr. Choudhury, you seem to get frightened. Do you ?" he said, casting his eyes down. "You have not seen how many hundreds of Sanatan Thakurs have been brought to senses by hard blows and sticks. Permit us and instantly we shall teach him a good lesson. You can't achieve your ends until you give him a nice thrashing."

At this Jotsna burst into a fit of laughter.

"What you have said is quite true," she replied as she was handing them cups of tea. "Before we have recourse to force and riot, I think it wise to thrash out, by discussions with a lawyer, the loop-holes of the law."

"Let us go just now and consult the lawyer," they said.

looking up at Nasim Choudhury. "You too come with us."

The tenor of their talk was very annoying to Nasim Choudhury. It seemed as if it had been none of his business. As they talked, the young men did not seem to show any special eagerness for his accompanying them to the lawyer for consultation. This gave a sudden jolt to his heart. From the beginning there was an awareness in him of Jotsna's reliance on these young men. So, without showing grudge, he went along with them to the lawyer.

The lawyer carefully went through the deed and other documents. A skilled member of the Dacca Bar, over fifty years in the profession, he showed finesse in dealing with the complex matters of law. Jotsna's only hope was that the advice of this experienced lawyer would help her meet the challenge and lead to an easy solution of the tangle. The young men argued with him. "It's enough if we can prove our possession," they said, "because possession is nine points of the law."

On much reflection the lawyer said : "There may be a riot if you will use force to occupy the disputed strip. It is hard to say beforehand whether it will be to your advantage or not. It's all the better if the verdict of the court is in your favour, but if it isn't the position will be still worse. And even if you win the criminal suit, Sanatan Thakur may ultimately sue for declaration of title."

He could not, however, give any such legal advice which would finish up the matter quickly. In his opinion it was best to settle the dispute amicably. Even if some money was to be spent on it, that would also be a gain, because it would help start construction at once.

To Jotsna it was cowardice to act up to the advice of the lawyer, tantamount to owning defeat to Sanatan Thakur. The two young men also lent support to her views. "If you take the case to court, you won't have to build the house at all. Going from this court to that up to the High Court, you will need five years to have the case finally settled. It is far better to take the risk. Occupy the land forcibly and complete the building. Let Sanatan Thakur go to court if he thinks necessary. Why should we sue him, wasting our time and money ?"

"Can you occupy the piece of land ?" she asked eagerly.

One of the young men laughed out. "Certainly. Why do you worry ? Sanatan Thakur is a cowardly fellow living by priesthood. How much money has he in his purse ? You'll see that he will flee from that place in the long run. These priests are very afraid of being thrashed."

Nasim Choudhury found no opportunity to take part in these discourses. In his heart he was indeed disinclined to create a disturbance, but he could not dare to say anything against the instigations of the youngmen and the keen enthusiasm of his wife. However, he was proud of Jotsna's dash and worldly wisdom. Since he had married into a rich family of the city, he was going to own a big house. He was at one with Jotsna in regard to the quick construction of the building. As soon as the house would be completed, part of it would be rented, while they would occupy the rest. This would bring them much money and there would be no need for his drudgery on a scanty salary in the rural country. Thus inspired with a new dream of his colourful future, he went away to his place of work.

In the surroundings of Nature—scenic, quiet, and free from distractions, Nasim Choudhury was more keenly conscious of Jotsna's absence from his side than want of the house. His desire to develop the new estate was depriving him of the sweet companionship of his young wife. He tried his best to get rid of his fancy for houses and lead an undisturbed, peaceful life. He wanted Jotsna very near to his heart and desired to enjoy their profound conjugal love. On that day it seemed to him that through the back door of the new fortune, the most precious possession of his life was slowly going to vanish. Who were those young people ? Why had they been so officiously eager and impatient to sieze the land with force ? Various questions began crowding into his mind, torturing him. He could not sleep at night, disturbed by various confused dreams. It seemed to him that the people of his village were beckoning him with their hands. He had been bred and brought up in an orthodox family and his parents used to obey the minutest religious ritual. Though born in such a family, under the impact of western civilisation, he had adapted himself to many modern social customs. But he now realised his weakness ; the

ancestral beliefs that lay hidden behind the new mentality which grew up in the environment influenced by western education and culture were raising their heads again. He had spoken a lot against the system of seclusion, but now the old beliefs seemed to be coming with all force on him again, convincing him that seclusion of women was a practice beneficial to society. Jotsna grew mysterious in his eyes.

The letter which came from Jotsna was lengthy and full of emotions. It brought him very happy news. It expressed no wooing love, but it bore a passionate urge for hastening the construction of the house. Every line of it was filled with the delight of success. Sanatan Thakur had been beaten out of the temple and she had brought the strip of land under possession and, without any waste of time, raised a wall around it to prove the fact of occupancy. She informed him that the foundation stone would be laid in a day or two.

As he read the letter, Nasim's eyes glowed with joy. He was full of praises for Jotsna's bravery.

The construction of the house was in progress. Nasim Choudhury was coming on leave to see the brick building in the making. His dream was being realised. Luck, wit, and spirit, wonderfully combined in Jotsna, had made possible what was an impossible dream. He thought he would embrace her passionately with open arms and speak effusively of her great qualities. Their love would deepen still more. A golden vista of future happiness opened up before his mind's eye.

The evening had passed. In the thoroughfares of the city were shining rows of dazzling electric lights. Alighting from the train, Nasim Choudhury hired a rickshaw and headed straight for his father-in-law's house. In Ramna, here and there speeding along the lonely streets, were the motor cars with dazzling head-lights. The rickshaw was on its way, and it was turning round a crossing when he saw two persons in another rickshaw going ahead of theirs at a little distance, a young fellow seated close to a young woman, each holding the other in a deep embrace of love. The youth seemed to be his acquaintance, maybe one of the two young men at the discussion table about the disputed land. But he could not actually recognise them in the indistinct light. The young woman's face was not clearly visible. Nasim asked the

rickshaw-puller to follow them.

Coming to the entrance of the Dacca Club, the rickshaw stopped and the young man and the young woman got down and proceeded to the Club. Nasim kept staring like a downright idiot ; his eyes were cast down by a tremendous shock. He sat down on the foot-path, the world around him grew dark, engulfing him in its viciousness. His vision of the new estate broke into pieces; the bricks of the building construction loosened and fell scattered on all sides. After this no one ever saw Nasim Choudhury.

Translated from the original Bengali by ALI AHSAN

THE LOST NIGHT

ASHFAQ AHMAD

He was buying Eid cards for the big sahib when he spotted *amman*. For a moment he thought he would get away unnoticed but his feet refused to move. He kept fingering nervously the one anna bit in his pocket. And then *amman* saw him. She moved across, put her hand on his shoulder and said: "Soodi ! no I can't believe it. Where've you been?"

He pulled out his hand from his pocket convulsively and picking up an Eid card, answered: "No where, *amman*. I have been here all the time."

"Since when?" asked *amman* disbelievingly.

"Since Partition. Myself and mother and everybody."

"But how is this that I never heard about this, never saw you ?"

He didn't speak, but smiled faintly, touching his lips with the Eid card. The salesman, noticing it, very courteously took it away from his hand and placed it back on the table.

Opening her bag, *amman* said: "You don't quarrel with your mother these days, do you ?" Masood blushed. Then, looking very intently at the Eid cards spread out in front of him, he said quietly: "No. In fact, I never did."

"Don't you tell me this," she said. "I remember you quarrelling with her over trifles, mere nothings."

He looked up straight into *amman's* eyes and half in defence, half sulkily, he answered: "But I was just a boy then. I have changed now."

But he had obviously not satisfied *amman*. Changing the conversation abruptly she said: "Your friend is gone to England for engineering. I was trying to buy a card for him."

"No !" he almost blurted out. Then said: "I see. Well, that's why I never met him. It is impossible that he shouldn't have looked for me, if here. How absolutely strange !"

Amman repeated softly: "Yes, he is gone. Another two years. This is for him." She showed him a card. It was inscribed with some verses bewailing separation and exodus from home.

Without really looking at it, Masood said: "But he will never get it by Eid. It is just a few days to Eid, you know."

"Of course, he'll get it," *amman* replied emphatically. "I am air mailing it."

"But even air mailing won't help," Masood insisted.

"Well, what of it ! He'll get it alright, maybe a day or two late." And before Masood could speak again, *amman* said: "Won't you come to the house? Your *didi* has taken her M.A. this year. You must come. Come on Eid day. Let's be all together on Eid."

When she had given him the address and the phone, she added: "Ring me up before you come. I am usually out on tour ; but on Eid, I'll be at home."

She touched him affectionately once again, straightened herself and walked out of the shop. Masood slipped his hand in his pocket and felt for the one anna bit, trying at the same time to pick out a card for the big sahib.

Masood's mother had re-married a year after her husband's death. It was a distant relation. Her aim was to be able to look after Masood and his education better, but her new husband had proved to be rather intolerant of Masood, with the result that she had hardly been able to do anything for him. At the beginning of each month, when Masood had to ask his father for some money to pay his school fees, his father would dilly-dally and give one excuse or the other. His mother never had any money. Even for petty household expenses, she had to depend upon her husband. Her helplessness in money matters generally turned into impatient anger against her son. Every morning, sitting in the kitchen with a cup of tea and some stale bread left over from the night's dinner, he would invariably be made to listen to something like—"Eat

this; damn you ! The things I have to undergo for your sake !" This used to hurt Masood every time she said it. But there was nothing that could be done. It was a kind of bill he had to pay for his measly breakfast. On the day when his father used to part with his school fees, the bill used to be higher. Smoking his *hookah*, he would say: "You are wasting your time. You are a bum. I have told your mother a hundred times that you should instead be sent to Dr. Baig's clinic, so that you could one day become a compounder. It will secure your future. What I don't understand is your mother's utter indifference to my suggestion." Masood would fold his arms in front of him and say: "It would be a good thing to learn, sir, but if I could only matriculate first."

And his father would cut him short, smile cynically and say: "Come, come ! Like mother, like son ! If *she* were earning this good money that is wasted on your fees every month, she wouldn't talk like this. What's the damage this month ?"

A little terrified, Masood would say: "Four rupees thirteen annas, sir."

"So it is thirteen annas more this time, eh !"

"It's for games. Masterji said that..."

"Now you listen to me ; you go tell your bloody master that you will play no games. You are tall enough to kiss a camel's tail and you *still* play games. Shame on you !"

Masood would clear his throat and say: "I am not keen on games, sir, but masterji has ordered everyone to pay for games, whether he wants to join or not."

"To hell with your masterji," his father would shout. "This is the most stupid thing I ever heard. What sort of a school is this anyway ? Is it a school or the Commissioner's office ?"

Masood would never argue whenever the conversation reached this point. He would just keep quiet. Then his father would pull down his long coat off the nail in the wall and reluctantly produce a five rupee note from the inner breast pocket. "Take it and tell your mother I gave you the money. When you return from school, I want you to drop into my office and leave the balance three annas with me. Understand ?"

Masood would fidget uneasily, his mind full of fear, gratitude and hate, and slip out of the room with the fiver held

tightly in his fist. His father, drawing noisily at the *hookah*, would shout across the room to his wife: "I have paid the fee to your little prince, the Deputy Sahib." Masood would always stop dead in his tracks at this. Silently, he would abuse his mother, run into his hovel of a room and prepare his satchel. He would wish his mother had not married this mean scoundrel. There was nothing he could do to his father. Silently abusing his mother was his way of getting square with both of them.

Just before his end-of-the-term examination, his mother gave birth to a child. It was a boy. The new arrival seemed to change everything. His mother was now exclusively devoted to the child. As for Masood, he was no more than a servant in the house. All day long, his father would harp upon Masood's utter uselessness and insist that he become an apprentice compounder at Dr. Baig's clinic. Somehow, his mother wouldn't agree and so things went on as usual.

One day, there came to the school a pedlar who was selling magic weather cards—the kind which change colour with the seasons. That was the day he met *amman*. Gulrez, who was Masood's class-mate, was the only son of a widowed mother and Masood's only friend. The weather card was truly magical. It had a pink circle in the middle and they were told that it would grow darker with the change in seasons. In summers it would go a deep red and in winters it would turn a bright yellow. It cost two annas. Almost everybody bought it except Masood.

The next morning, before leaving for school, he asked his mother quietly for two annas.

"I have no money," she rasped back. "Have you ever seen me even touch money ? What do you think I am—a millionairess ?"

Masood didn't say a thing. With very determined steps, he walked straight into his father's office. He just went and stood there in front of him, feeling miserable.

"What do you want ?" his father asked.

"Nothing, sir." His throat had gone dry.

"There *is* something."

"It is nothing, sir."

"Then why the hell have you come ?"

"Well, sir, I want...I want two annas. In the school..."

"Shut up," he screamed. "You want two annas! You scoundrel! What have you done to come barging into my office demanding money. Have you no shame?"

Masood froze with fright and humiliation. Then on a sudden impulse he ran out of the room. It seemed to him as if somebody was drilling the words 'Have you no shame' deep into his ears. He was now running like a dog who has been whipped. His father's words were like a strident, unceasingly clamorous gramophone record that he couldn't shut out. Then he suddenly stopped and looked around. The street was full of people, going their way, unmindful of him. He stood there for some time, panting, trying to get his breath back. With weary steps he entered the school gates.

After the classes were over, Gulrez asked him to come home. He said they would shut themselves up in a room, close all the windows and see the card change colour. When they entered the little house, a thin middle-aged woman in a white *sari* was sitting on the verandah, darning something. She had a grey stole spread over her shoulders. She was small, but it seemed to Masood as if she filled the place with her mere presence. "Come on, run," Gulrez beckoned to him. Dragging his feet on the cemented floor, he stopped in front of his mother and said: "*Amman*, look what I have got? It is a magic card. Look!" His mother examined the card carefully and said: "It's very nice." Then she looked at Masood, for the first time. He was wearing a dirty pair of trousers and canvas shoes, one of which showed his toes sticking out. Gulrez pulled at Masood's sleeve. "This is my friend, *amman*. His name is Masood. We are in the same class. He has come to see the magic card change colour."

Amman rose from her chair. She looked at Masood intently. A smile spread over her face. "You don't have a card, Masood?" she asked him very softly.

Masood felt as if he had always known this woman. He felt as if he had grown in her house and gone to sleep every night with her loving hands caressing him.

Gulrez shook his card in the air proudly and said: "He didn't, *amman*. He had no money. He never has any money."

She said very gently: "What sort of a friend are you Gulrez? You should have bought him one too. *You* had

money."

"But I bought sweetmeats with the rest," Gulrez answered guiltily.

"Do you prefer sweetmeats to your friend?" *amman* asked.

"No *amman*," he said, very contrite and self-conscious. Then he took Masood by the hand and dragged him into a room.

There was a red sofa there and a girl sitting, quietly knitting a sweater. "Look, *didi*, look ! I have a magic card," Gulrez screamed. Without looking up, she replied: "It is very nice." Gulrez eyed his sister sulkily and went out into the next room, still holding Masood's hand. He banged the door loudly. "Quiet," she said, without looking up.

When they were in the next room, Gulrez whispered in his ear: "Shut all the doors and windows. The room will grow warm and we'll then be able to see the card change colour." They shut all the doors and windows and waited for the card to get red. It didn't. "Let's go to the kitchen and put it in front of the fire," Masood had a sudden idea.

Whooping like Indians, they ran into the kitchen. *Amman* was there, slicing vegetables with a knife. They put the card in front of the fire and in a moment it became red like a tomato.

This was his first meeting with *amman*. When he was leaving the house after high tea, she came to the door. "Come again," she said. After this, he started spending most of his time in *amman's* house. She called him her other son.

After the partition of the country, everything was dislocated. Families were separated and friends were lost to each other. And today, after three years, he had met *amman* for the first time in that shop.

Masood had a petty job in an office and he was living in two very small and dingy rooms. And now he started spending all his free time with *amman*. *Didi* had taken her M.A. and become more withdrawn. All day long she would sit in a corner and knit or crochet. She hardly spoke to anybody. When she did, it was as if her words were dry sponge pieces.

Amman asked him on a number of occasions about his parents, but Masood always would get off with a remark like: "They are somewhere around. I have no idea really."

After office, Masood would, without fail, get to her home and stay till late night. *Didi* never took any interest in him. Many times, she would leave the room very abruptly in the middle of something. One night it got very late and *amman* asked him to sleep there. After this, Masood never went back to his dingy rooms.

Over the years, Masood had changed. Perhaps as a gesture of defiance against his poverty as a child, he had started gambling. On the first of every month, with his salary in his pocket, he would find his way into a gambling place in the heart of the city. He would walk with quick steps through the narrow, winding streets to get to the old, rickety hut which had a threadbare jute curtain at the front door. There were two rooms and no electricity, just a kerosene lamp which smoked. There he would always find his gambling cronies, dead drunk on bootleg liquor. Nobody knew their real names, but they were called *Chatoo*, *Bhanbiri*, and *Dhalan*. And there was a woman everybody addressed as *Raban*. When Masood used to walk through the door, she would quietly say, always in the same tone: "Here comes the Raja." Then the game would start. Masood always played to the finish. He would either go out with his pockets full with their greasy money, or his own empty as a blind well.

Amman knew that Masood had become active and boisterous, since he had grown up, but she had no idea he gamled. Every first-of-the-month, *amman* would wait for him till midnight, thinking of Gulrez and then of him, and again of her son, till the two got muddled up in her mind. *Didi* would turn once or twice in her bed, watch *amman* sleepily and go to sleep again, her face towards the wall.

Masood used to enter very quietly, taking care not to make any noise.

"Where have you been?" *amman* would ask him.

"No where," he would answer.

"So you were here, were you ?"

"I was with some friends, chatting."

"Who are these friends ? I would like to see them sometime," she would say. And the matter would end there.

He would sit on his bed and start removing his shoes. *Amman* would throw a Kit Kat chocolate packet across to him and say: "I went to the bazar today. Give half of it to your

didi."

Without answering, Masood would lie straight as a log on his bed, his sheets around him. "Never lie like this. Sleep on your side. I get nervous when I see somebody sleeping like this," *amman* would say.

She always used to make him read the letters Gulrez sent to her from England. She would sometimes make him read them aloud, again and again, till he got tired. In every letter, Gulrez either asked for money or warm clothing. *Amman* made the parcels herself, sealed them with wax and Masood would go to the post office to deliver them.

It was the middle of the month. Masood was quite broke. Suddenly he met Bhanbiri on the road, who informed him that the latest to enter the gambling group was a rich junk dealer named Rukna who was free with his money and played for high stakes. Bhanbiri told Masood that Rukna was, these days, a regular visitor to the house. All Masood had at that time was a parcel of warm clothing for Gulrez, which he was on his way to deliver to the post office. He didn't think twice. He went across to a second hand clothes dealer's shop that he knew and sold off the contents for a hundred and fifty rupees. That night he didn't go home. *Amman* kept waiting for him till daybreak. When he finally slunk into the house, he didn't have a penny on him. He had lost all. Next morning, *amman*, strangely enough, didn't ask him where he had been. She merely wanted the receipt.

"It has been sent," he replied.

"And the receipt?" *didi* asked pointedly. Masood stared hard at her before saying: "I must have left it at the place I spent the night at."

Nothing more was said. Masood knew that *amman* earned only four hundred rupees a month. "This won't kill her," he consoled himself.

One day when twenty-five rupees were found missing from *didi's* dressing table, there was trouble. She told *amman* that she suspected Masood of the theft. When *amman* heard this, she started crying. "Today you accuse him; tomorrow you will accuse me," she said amid sobs. But *didi* remained convinced that it was Masood who had done it. Mother and daughter quarrelled the whole afternoon. None of them ate anything at dinner. That night Masood won some money.

He was in luck.

There was a letter from Gulrez saying that he had not received the warm clothes they had sent him. Inquiries were made at the post office and Masood was asked to find the receipt. Nothing happened. In the end, *amman* put it all on the post office. However, she didn't show Masood the letter from England. She merely mentioned it. Once or twice, Masood insisted upon seeing the letter, but *amman* told him that it was misplaced somewhere. Masood was curious. And one day he found it among *amman's* papers. Gulrez had written: "It is getting to be unbearably cold here. Money, however, is my biggest worry. I have to join a new course and this would mean two thousand rupees. Mother, I know you haven't any money, but tell me what to do. I can't leave without a degree."

All day long he kept thinking of the letter. In the end he told himself that perhaps *amman* had more money than she let out. Probably, she thought, this would discourage her son from extravagance. From the office, he went straight home, lost in these thoughts. He had not been able to make up his mind.

Didi had gone out. *Amman* was in one of the rooms. Masood finally located her and stood behind a door watching her open a box. *Amman* took some gold ornaments out of it and put them in her hand bag. She even slipped the little gold ring she wore off her finger and into the bag. When she had finished, Masood entered the room.

"Going somewhere, *amman*?"

She looked a little startled. Then she smiled faintly. "I am going to the bazar. It's good that you have come. There was nobody at home. I'll get you a nice little packet of Kit Kat chocolate."

"Oh ! I don't think I really could stay," Masood replied. "You see we got off early today because the boys at the office are playing a football match. I will go and meet some people. I don't think I could really stay at home."

"That's alright," she said. "I'll be back soon."

Masood took off his jacket and stretched himself on the bed. Then he got up, found one of *didi's* knitting needles and went into *amman's* room and with the help of the needle managed to get *amman's* locked box open. The fifty rupees

that he found there, he put into his pocket. Then he walked out, leaving a message for her that he would be late for dinner.

He next went to a colleague's house and begged him to lend him two hundred rupees that he had to have to be able to buy some medicines for his dying mother. His friend only had one hundred and fifty, but he willingly gave the money to Masood, on the quiet, without telling his wife. "Sorry, old man, I wish I could get you more ! I am sure your mother will be alright."

The evening had fallen when Masood walked out of his friend's house. He spent some time just sauntering about the streets. Then he went into a restaurant and ordered himself a meal, followed by a cup of tea at the railway station first class refreshment rooms.

When he entered the dark little house with the jute curtain at the door, Raban announced: "Here comes the Raja."

Rukna, the rich junk dealer coughed artificially and replied: "We are no paupers here."

Masood merely smiled and sat down in front of Rukna on the floor. He put the two hundred rupees in front of him. "So, you have come for a game," Rukna said, looking at Masood.

In a few minutes they were at it. In the first few hands, Masood had managed to slip two of Rukna's greasy hundred rupee notes into his pocket. Rukna looked at him defiantly. "I have more," he said. "Money is never my problem." And he produced four more and threw them in front of him on the floor.

The game was resumed.

Didi was turning in her bed restlessly. *Amman* sat close to her in a chair. On the table in front of her lay a packet of Kit Kat chocolate.

The game ended. Masood swept all of Rukna's money from the floor and was about to get up when Rukna said: "This is not the end, my friend. Rukna always has money." And from somewhere, he produced another two hundred rupees. "It won't be like this," Masood challenged him. "Stake all you have. Let us settle this up in one hand!" Rukna gave him a fierce look. "Alright, let it be that way. No one ever scared me". He put six hundred more on the floor. "Come on now,"

he said.

Amman looked towards the door and said quietly to herself: "Wonder where he is. What is holding him?" Then she examined the Kit Kat packet. It had become soggy and soft with heat. She sprinkled some water on it and lay back in the chair. *Didi* turned on her side, watched her mother for a moment and went back to her uneasy sleep again.

Masood picked up a handful of currency notes from in front of Rukna and laughed. The rest had gone to sleep on the floor and Raban was reclining against the wall drowsily. Rukna looked at Masood with blood-shot eyes. "I still have two hundred," he said.

"Why don't you search all your pockets once for all. There may be more," Masood jeered.

Amman slipped her hand under *didi's* pillow and took out a watch and saw the time.

"It is one," she said to herself.

There was some noise at the gate. *Amman* sprang up from her chair and ran out. It was only a street dog. She came back.

The game had finally ended. Rukna had finished all his money. "Is that all?" Masood asked.

"That's all for tonight," he said in a flat voice.

Masood folded all the money in a neat stack and put it into his front pocket. He got up, looked around the room and said: "On the first of the month then."

Rukna didn't answer. When he was out in the street, he took a long and deep breath. Then he undid his collar and started walking slowly. "This makes it just eighteen hundred. Gulrez wants two thousand. How about the rest?" he said to himself.

But then something happened. He was down on the ground. Somebody was on top of him. The next moment a sharp and long knife had gone through him. Somebody shouted: "Get the money out." The knife had gone in, piercing the thick wad of money right through. "I can't get it out," somebody else said.

Suddenly there were whistles in the street. There were people running.

Masood rose on an elbow and with a super-human effort pulled the knife out of his breast and threw it aside. Then

he felt for the wad of money. It was still there. He tried to get up, but fell back. Then putting his hand in his pocket, he took out the blood-stained notes and tried to crawl forward. He couldn't. His head hit the cobble-stones and he gasped: "*Amman* ! *Amman* ! *Amman* !" His fist fell open and the thick packet slipped out of his fingers, on to the ground.

Amman sprinkled some water on the Kit Kat chocolate and said to herself: "I wonder where he is !"

Translated from the original Urdu by KHALID HASSAN

ACQUAINTANCE WITH SATAN

MAHBUB-UL ALAM

I was a boy. My world was a world of sport and it was peopled by the companions of my games. Even my mother occupied but a small place in it. As I had grown up a bit, she no longer could restrain me. When I came home at the end of the day and took refuge there, the boy in me would cast up the accounts of the day's play, whether I had tried or not, spoken the truth or not, been just in my dealings with others or not. If I came out of the reckoning creditably, I fell peacefully asleep in her arms and imagined the great and splendid Allah smiling benignly upon me from the higher heavens.

But what was play to me was spoken of as devilry by my elders. There was no way to restrain us from this play. For whatever we did became a game and what our elders prescribed for us as 'play' turned to devilry in our hands. It had been like that from infancy. I acquired a well-developed idea of the devil in this way. I can even give you a history of the evolution of this idea. It was like this.

It started when we were naked babies. I had not got beyond playing *Mala O Dhula* (Coconut-shell and Dust). To this game my mother not only gave her consent, she often actively assisted us. She would bring us coconut shells from the pantry while some of us brought mangrove leaves, petals of the banana flower and other things that were needed. Later I realised that unless mother kept us occupied with the

playing of some game, she had no time to do the house-work. And, looking back from the present, I also see that through our games she recovered something of her own lost childhood. Be that as it may, one day my cousin Raouf got hold of the broken rim of a water-pot. He brought it and the game became so enthralling that after twenty-five years I can still point out the spot beside the landing place where it was played. Of course, the pomegranate tree, in the cool shade of which mother told us to stay, has long since disappeared without trace. But the game turned out in the end to be only a device of the devil after all. It ended in disaster. As the game broke up, we were throwing dust into the wind. With mischief laughing in his face and eyes, little Raouf turned round holding the rim of the pot in his hand. The instant he hurled it at my head with a shout, his intention came to me in a flash. In the subsequent chorus of yells that arose, Raouf's terrified voice was audible two degrees higher than my anguished one. Higher still was heard the sympathetic wailing of Raouf's abridged edition, little Bor. Without understanding anything, he put his hands on his knees and let out such a shriek on behalf of his elder brother that I could not help feeling surprised and interested despite the great pain I was in. My aunt and my mother came running up in consternation. Mother took me into her arms. My aunt caught hold of her two chicks by their wings and went into the house. Some time later, still in my mother's arms, I appeared at my uncle's door. My aunt was seated upon the steps, bathing the ailing Alim's head. Mother showed her my head and began to complain. After a single side-long glance at it, my aunt grew grave. I was feeling it with my hand. The rim of the water pot was outlined perfectly by a series of bumps. I was most anxious to see it. But as there was no way to do so, I rubbed it gingerly. Raouf's sparkling, mischievous face still swims in front of my eyes ; my memory of it is undimmed even today.

This event alienated Raouf and me and our mothers. Living in the same house, this unfriendliness was as painful to maintain as it was difficult. In the end my mother and aunt made it up. I heard my mother explain it was not Raouf's fault that he threw the rim of the pot ; the devil had tricked him into doing it. Who but Satan makes people

enemies ? At that Raouf and I joined up again. On the whole everybody was relieved.

I felt an aversion for Satan because of the pot rim from the very beginning of our acquaintance. But one night I become aware of the deep affinity between us. The night was as monstrously dark as it was stormy. Now and then a flash of lightning illumined the room in which we, mother and son, were lying. The following crashes of thunder seemed almost to shatter it to pieces. Terrified, I nestled close to my mother and asked: "Why should it be like that ?" "Satan has been eavesdropping," she said, "on the affairs of the Heavenly Throne. The angels are driving him away with stones." Both these acts were so familiar to me I had no difficulty in believing my mother. My child mind, on its small spinning wheel, span out the thread of the idea and the whole affair became clear to me. Satan, then, was very clever and extremely adroit. Satan at once became a young man and Allah, accordingly, very old and infirm. Let me say here that I did not always think of Allah as old and infirm. Later He became to me a most dynamic centre of life.

Translated from the original Bengali by ALI AHSAN

THE GRASS, THE WIND AND THE CRIPPLE

ENVER SAJJAD

He smiled in the darkness : his lips moved.

"Fireflies, shining in the hair of wandering souls ; light's thighs, sucking on meatless bones !"

"Shut up !"

"Shut up ?"

Suddenly serious again, he looked at his companions. The blending of light and shadow had given his face an eighth colour. The pools in the valleys of his eyes had all dried up.

He had been a teacher once, in this same school.

"The candle kindles the seed of youth in the loins. The genes of that seed will have their opening in the stars, shining like the glory of Adam !"

"Oh, shut up," said the cripple. "I want to think."

"What ?"

"About the coming of Imam Mehdi; about the return of the Prophet Jesus."

The teacher's lips moved in unison with the cripple's voice. His lips writhed, mouthing the words soundlessly. The parchment on his tongue seemed to be strung to the moon-beams streaming through the broken window. On his arms were moon-shaped sores which never healed.

The other one shut his eyes in distaste.

"Don't those sores ever frighten you ?"

"Imam Mehdi," said the cripple, covering his stump

with his cotton blanket.

"I can't endure this any more," said the other. "We're getting weaker every day while the forces of decay are getting stronger. You get the blast of foul smell sometimes from the eyes, sometimes the arms, sometimes from the brain itself," he sighed. "We were always weak, always sinful. When have not we looked to other people for emollients ?"

The teacher looked lovingly at his scars. "I cannot do anything about your nose, can I ?"

The cripple laughed and got up. He rapped crazily on the black-board. "Three, two, one, zero, fire ! The day of reckoning! The day of reckoning ! I have come ! I have returned !"

"Faithless ! Heretic ! Blasphemer !" The other one began murmuring the litany to himself.

"Giving you a chance has put us in danger. Your escape has made you forget your hunger. I will look in the library ; there might still be something left to eat."

He threaded his way through the half-burnt desks, then through the dark corridor, feeling his way with the walls. He looked into every cupboard and on every shelf, but the few scraps of bread and meat had vanished. After half-an-hour of searching, he lost patience, picked up a heavy book and threw it out of the window. A numbness spread over his body. He sat on the floor, despondent to the core, watching the moons on his arms come alive with pain. He pressed his hands against his head.

Why are we in so much trouble ? Why have we given up our homes for the sake of this hell ? Why could we not have prevented Cashme from getting lost ? We are as grass, as the wind, yet we are bound in chains ! We came to this school to rest, and now we cannot get away ! How can we get out of here? We have got to reach Headquarters ! We have got to find Cashme! Like grass, like wind, yet bound in chains !

Dum, dum, dum, de-dum.

The softly struck beat of a *dholak*.

So, someone else who thinks that this half-burnt school is a refuge, who wanted to rest here and is now caught. He must have stolen my food.

Anger and a desire for revenge flooded through him as he got up and strode towards the adjoining room. For the first

time he saw the shaft of pale light; the blood coursed hotly through his veins. He reached the half-open door through which the light and the sound of the *dholak* had came. A moment later he pushed it wide open.

"I have been playing the *dholak* for a long time. You only heard it now."

He was sitting in the centre of the room with the percussion instrument hanging around his neck. Near him was a small lantern, and the food-box. His hand paused on the drum.

"You came looking for food ? So did I."

The man whose face was of an eighth colour, the lakes of whose eyes had dried up, whose arms were covered with festering moons from the hands to the elbows and who was a teacher, sprang quickly forward. The drummer immediately rose and intercepted him.

"O, no ! We will both eat it. You don't know from out of what dark pits I managed to find it."

"Who are you ?" His lips moved for the first time.

"What difference does that make? I have found you for your own sake. Isn't that enough ? Anyone could have murdered you. Yes, that does make some difference."

"Could have murdered me ?"

"Could ! Can, even now. You are a fool ; you carry no arms."

"I am hungry."

The drummer bent and took the lid off the box.

"It's empty."

"You tell me that now !"

"Those dogs have had it. I got this box empty."

"My food !"

"Your food ! You have got nothing, no grain, no land, no mountains. *Nothing* is yours !"

"What about you ? You're hungry also."

"I've got my *dholak*," he stroked it lovingly. "You *do* recognise me ?"

He looked at him closely.

"They gave me nothing to eat—they'd throw me the bones and set the dogs at me. I ran away."

"Who are they ? Where ? How many ?"

"Don't get excited. You would tremble at the sight of

them."

"I don't know how many centuries I have been imprisoned in this place," he said, staring at the candle flame. "One of my companions has lost an arm, the other has lost his mind."

"I know. Only yesterday I peeped at them from behind the blackboard." The drummer looked at him with amusement. "I didn't let those predators get at you. When they came to set fire to the place, I frightened them away."

"With your drum ? Thank you very much."

"You are grateful ?"

"O, yes."

"Then sit down."

They sat facing each other. He began playing the *dholak*, softly and slowly at first, then with increasing tempo until he was swaying, caught up in his own rhythm. His fingers flashed against the membrane of the drum, the belly of the whole room swelled with sound. Suddenly the fingers stopped. He looked into the teacher's eyes.

"I am so hungry, I could eat you."

"Don't talk like that." He struggled to escape the spell of those eyes, of that rhythm.

"Why not ? Those people used to put me on display in a super market show case with dog's food. They hated me; not that they said so, but I could read it on their faces—that's why I waited for an opportunity to break the show case and run away."

"See this."

His right hand had one finger missing.

"I broke the glass and this finger got cut off; it dropped there."

"Which means that a part of your body is still with them —still in the dog's food show case."

The drummer looked away from his right hand and stared fixedly at the teacher. He whirled and got up.

"Why did you say that ?" There was impatience and anger in his voice.

"Forget about the finger. If you go back for it, you'll only get caught again."

"That's enough from you ! Now get out of here, go on back to your companions, otherwise I'll eat you up ! Go on ! You have to look for Cashme, haven't you ? Get some

weapons and do so before you lose a finger, or an arm. I haven't strength enough to sit here smelling your putrid sores."

Even he knew about Cashme !

The teacher did not understand all this. He sat silently for a few more moments. Then, without a word, he got up and came away. The circulation in his legs had stopped so he staggered down the steps leading to the library. Sweat flowed in rivulets from his pores.

"How can one face these mad predators without weapons ? I'll have to find something."

He entered the dark class room in which the cripple and the other were barely drawing breath.

"You ?" The cripple strained his eyes in the gloom.

"Yes."

"Did you bring something to eat?"

"No."

"Then what were you doing there ? Debauching..!"

"Don't abuse me, you wretch !"

The other muttered, through clenched teeth : "Forget about your stomachs ; show remorse for your sins."

"I've committed no sins," snapped the cripple, "nor am I afraid of hell's fires. I am my own god, not you."

The teacher stood silently by the wall. He was not listening ; with eyelids blinking, he was looking out into the night, trying to read the future by the moon's inadequate light.

"If there is a hell, I am in it now. I have been burnt to a meaningless cinder. Aren't you aware of the way in which we are sinking deeper every day into the morass of our own rotting bodies ?"

"God is with you," said the other, with unshakable faith. "Even after you die, your soul will be in torture for ever."

"I haven't a soul, I don't want to live for ever. It's only your desire for eternal life which prompts your belief. But nothing will come of it. We are subject to the Laws of Nature."

"Haven't you any consciousness of sin ?"

"Of only one sin, which is a desire to live, as I was born, until I die my natural death."

"Like the wind, like the grass," murmured the teacher, "part earth, part sky. This derelict school is affecting our minds. We must get out of this dark pit and find something to eat."

"You go, glutton !" exclaimed the cripple.

"You're a coward," said the other. "You're frightened of leaving this place. Because in this life...."

"I can still stand this daily hell, unlike you." The cripple cut the night with his waving stump. "I'm not a coward. I know what truth is, what life is, and what death is. You're the coward because you are caught in a net of sin and re-demption—you're frightened of the Day of Judgment. My sin is that I gave an arm for a contingent truth ; my redemption shall be, after making that sacrifice, in learning how to re-organise every cell in my body. There is no Day of Judgment for me. This is my Day of Judgment."

"Then why don't you get out of here ?"

"I am no glory-hunting hero. Instead of sitting inertly, I am trying to learn. I may draw breath in the south-east but my sympathies range universally. I am trying to re-assemble the shreds from whatever corner tyranny has scattered them. Actually, you should bury yourself now—you are inert in your desire to become a hero. You have not the power to remain alive, you are putrefying."

"God forgive you." The other's uncontrolable sigh filled the darkness.

Why should their voices and that sigh have made him get up and run out of the room ? Their voices faded ; his steps became slower ; he smiled.

I am still in control of my senses. I am also not a hero or am I ? I dislike the word intensely. It is the desire to become a hero which makes light's thighs suck meatless bones and hide the genes in the sterile seed of Adam's glory. I have got to report to Headquarters that the cripple's stump has begun to bleed with so much thumping and that the other has begun to rave.

Near the steps he heard once more the beat of the *dholak*. Nine fingers in movement, nine tones in harmony. The captive sound waves made the school rooms into a merry-go-round of dreams. Panting, he leaned against a pillar for support. He remembered that he had no weapon. Even if he found the food, it would not be safe without a weapon. Something glinted in the moonlight. He sprang to pick it up; the pole on which the flag had been flying the same evening. As soon as he touched it, a new confidence suffused his body.

Every ray of moonlight seemed to be a path.

Which beam shall I follow ?

All at once his nostrils expanded.

Where is the stench coming from ? Putrefying corpses, wet, rotting grain.

He moved back to escape from the odour of decay. It followed him. He turned and ran. He bumped into something, turned and ran again. In front were countless, shining eyes. Amongst them were nine fingers rapping out his heartbeat against the membrane of night. He wiped the sweat off his face with his arm and gripped the pipe firmly with both hands. The eyes and fingers advanced.

I must get out of here and make my report to Headquarters. I must find my two companions in the darkness and then the three of us must destroy the ammunition dump on the west side today. Then we must find Cashme and get out of here. But why are these eyes and fingers confronting me ? How can I escape them?

He looked on all sides, and each reflected what was in front of him. Gathering all his courage in his legs and whirling the pipe with both hands, he ran and ran. He ran, ignoring the reflection of his shining sores in the dried lakes and the fruit blisters as they hung smiling from the trees. Then his legs began to tire. His grip on the pipe slackened. He was about ready to fall from exhaustion when the valley became a medley of barking, shouting and screaming. He lifted his tired eyes towards the sound. There were flames reaching to the very vault of the sky. At a short distance, he could see the ghost of the school dancing among the burning buildings. From the centre of the flames came the symphony of the nine fingers. He looked through the door-way of the school ; against the back drop of flames an army of shadows was advancing. In the front came a crowd of wildly dancing people.

What he saw next froze the blood in his veins, and he backed away.

In the crowd a huge brute had raised aloft a bamboo pole to which the cripple had been tied. He waved him about in the air.

He hid behind some bushes. At a short distance from him they drove the pole into the ground and began dancing around it.

"Kill me ! Why do you not kill me ?"

"There is no fun in killing you immediately," shrieked

someone in the crowd.

"You murdered my companion immediately."

"He was useless." They all laughed.

"True. But the cells in my body will be formed anew."

They laughed derisively.

He also loves Cashme—and I am looking for her. The light's thighs are sucking meatless bones. I wish I could help him.

"Three,two, one, zero, fire! The day of judgment! The day of reckoning! I will come again! I will come again!"

The stump was beating a tattoo against the blackboard of night.

"In the south-east, but my sympathies are universal. Every particle from wherever the usurper...."

One stepped forward and cut off his other hand.

Patience, friend, patience! The genes of the seed will open in the stars.

The dance became more frenzied. One threw his knife; it entered his belly just below the navel.

Shining, like the glory of Adam!

Smiling, the cripple screamed : "You have not killed me."

They fell on him.

No, I must save myself. If they see me, the whole mission will fail. For Cashme's sake I cannot help you. Where is she? I must find her for my sake—and for yours. Goodbye, my friend.

Behind the screen of hedges he turned to go, and his feet froze. They had found him—the dogs, whining and wagging their tails.

Do not bark, do not bark.

He implored them silently with his finger and retreated slowly. Then he twisted and ran. The dogs gave chase in full cry. He hurled the pipe at them, but they came on. Over rocks and pits he hurried, unheedful of his destination. At times he would duck behind a tree or shrub, but each time the dogs nosed him out, so he ran on. Then he stumbled against something and fell flat on his face.

Blackout!

When he opened his eyes it was morning. His aching body reassured him that he was still alive. Supine, he let his eyes wander over the scene and saw how the cloud of smoke

over the buildings mingled lazily with the birds. The school.

The memory of the night before came vividly back to him.

O ho ! I have got to make my report to Headquarters.

He nursed his body along. As he was about to step past the smouldering threshold, he heard the cry of a child. He crossed to the door-way of a hutment opposite. The door was half-open and the smell of kerosene still pervaded the place. The corpse of a girl was lying on the floor. Her clothes were shredded and blood had clotted on the inside of her thighs.

Cashme !

A new-born child whimpered in her lap. One finger on one hand had been burnt. With that burnt hand he was beating on the blackened breast.

"*Three, two, one, zero*! *The day of reckoning*! *The day of reckoning*! *I have come*! *I have returned*!"

The teacher looked at his arms. The scabs had come loose and were hanging ready to drop away. His flesh, sweet and fresh, was renewing itself.

He picked up the child and showered it with kisses.

Translated from the original Urdu by RIAZ HASSAN

THE HEART DIVIDED

MUMTAZ SHAH NAWAZ

"Apa, what do you think of him ?" Zohra asked her sister the next day.

"I think he's a wonderful young man, and you're very lucky."

"Oh ! I'm so glad. But .... but will father think the same ?"

"Ahmad should speak to him as soon as possible."

"He's with him now."

"Is he ? Have you said anything to mother ?"

"No ! I'm waiting for you to broach the subject. Will you ?"

"Alright. I'll do my best, but it will all depend on what father has to say."

"Do you think he'll object ?"

"He shouldn't, but there are prejudices you know."

"Prejudices !"

"Well, Ahmad's a fine young man and well educated and all that, but will father be able to forget that he's the son of his own clerk ?'

"But ! But surely that shouldn't matter."

"It shouldn't, but it does."

A maid came into the room. "Sheikh Sahib has sent for Zohra Bibi," she said.

"Go dear," said Sughra.

"I....Apa please come with me."

"Alright."

Jamaluddin was sitting in his study and his wife sat beside him and seeing the expression of her face, Sughra knew what had happened.

"Sit down Zohra," said their father, "and your too Sughra. I'm glad you are here. Now, about this young man whose proposal for Zohra I have just rejected."

"Father !" cried Zohra.

"Don't interrupt. I understand that you have been meeting him in Amritsar."

"Yes."

"Who introduced you ?"

"Professor Illmuddin."

"That was unwise on his part, but it would not have mattered but for your subsequent behaviour. I take it that you have been meeting constantly and have formed an attachment ?"

"Y es."

"Which is inevitable when a young and lonely girl is continually in the company of a clever man."

"Father !" said Sughra. "You are making unjust insinuations. Ahmad has been in jail for more than a year in the Independence movement."

"Ah !"

"He was in Deolali camp."

"So ! He has been carrying on subversive activities as well. In any case, his doings don't concern us, for I consider him unsuitable in every way and have told him so. Zohra, I've indulged you too much and given in to your whims time and again. But this is too much. You cannot marry Ahmad Hussain."

"Father dear," said Zohra. "I think you are unfair and prejudiced."

"I'm not prejudiced, Zohra. I'm a realist."

"Then why are you against my marrying Ahmad ? He has all those qualities which you have always told me should be present in a man. He is well educated and has high moral principles. He is young...and ..charming...and...I love him."

"What ?" cried her mother. "Have you no shame saying such a thing to our face ?"

"There is no shame in sincere and pure affection."

"Girls of good families don't go about falling in love !"

"Don't they ? And pray how do you prevent it ? By placing a ban on nature ?"

"Hush ! Zohra," said her father. "Don't be rude to your mother and don't argue, for argument will not help. We have decided, your mother and I, that you should not marry this young man."

"And your reasons ?"

"Many," began Jamaluddin, but his wife interrupted him impatiently.

"Is it not enough that he's the son of your father's clerk ?" she cried.

"So what ?"

"This, that it would be a disgrace for the family if you married him, for his family is not in the same class as ours, besides they belong to a lower caste."

"Class ! Caste !" questioned Sughra. "Mother, are you a Muslim ?"

"Don't talk nonsense."

"It's not nonsense, for Islam made all men equal, and yet Muslims like you talk of class and caste. Our present degradation is not to be wondered at, for we have forgotten the lessons our Prophet taught us, those principles that every great thinker has tried to keep alive. ? Have you forgotten that Islam came to abolish all barriers of tribe, class and caste, and every Muslim must believe in an international, classless, and casteless society."

"That was a good lecture, Sughra," smiled Jamaluddin. "But speaking on the platform is one thing and dealing with personal problems is quite a different matter. I'm afraid we don't live in an ideal world, and therefore such considerations as class and caste do matter."

"Then we are not true Muslims, and we shall remain slaves."

"Now you are going off the point."

"Well then, coming back to the point, father," said Zohra quietly, "I must repeat that I love Ahmad and I intend to marry him."

"What ? You'd defy me ?"

"It's no question of defiance. I don't want to do anything

wrong, but if, blinded by prejudice, you stand in the way of my happiness. . . ."

"Zohra !"

". . then I have only this to say," she went on calmly, "that I shall marry Ahmad with your consent, if possible, without it if necessary."

"You dare !"

"Yes, I dare, for I know that I'm in the right."

"And I shall stand by Zohra !" exclaimed Sughra.

"Get out of my sight, both of you," Jamaluddin shouted, and his wife began to sob.

"Ya Allah, what shall I do ?" she wailed. "Why did I have to have such children ?"

Sughra led Zohra out of the room and tried to comfort her.

"Don't worry, dear," she said. "I'll stand by you and so will Habib and Najma."

"Will they ?"

"Yes, I talked to them this morning, and by and by father and mother will come round."

"But ! But you don't understand," said Zohra and two heavy tears dropped from her lashes on to her cheeks. "Ahmad ! Oh, he's so proud. I don't know what father's said to him. You know Sughra, I've loved him for so long ..and he...I could feel he cared. But for a long time he thought me unsuitable—rich and spoilt and all that—and it took me ages to win his respect as well as his love. And now, this !"

"I'll go and see him and explain."

"Will you ? Oh Apa, will you ?"

"Of course ! There, don't cry. You are a baby after all." She took her in her arms and smoothed the unruly curls.

The peace of the home was disrupted again, and this time all the younger people were ranged against the elders and Jamaluddin was deeply annoyed by this rebellion. He felt that it was most unreasonable on the part of his children to expect him to throw family prestige to the winds.

The news that Zohra wanted to marry Ahmad leaked out through the servants and various uncles and cousins rushed to Jamaluddin to prevent what they thought would be a disaster, while aunts and neices alike visited Jamaluddin's wife and

told her to stick to her stand or the name of their family would be in the mud.

"Son of your own clerk !" shouted Anwari. "One of whose aunts has been a maid in the house of our aunt ! What will the world say ? Can you not find a better match for Zohra ?"

"They are so low caste, too," added Bilquis. "Why, people are saying that Zohra must have had an illicit connection with him."

"Stop your nonsense !" cried Sughra.

"Well, I'm only repeating what others are saying."

So it went on for two days and then a greater disaster over-shadowed their personal differences. The Indian Congress rejected the British proposals and the whole country was plunged into despondency. The Muslim League rejection followed and once again the supporters of the two great organizations argued and bickered in every town and street. They were agreed on one point only—their rejection of the British proposals, but their reasons were very different.

"How could Congress accept the novel principle of non-accession?" said a Congressman to Habib.

"Would you force people into the Indian Union against their will ?" a Muslim Leaguer retorted.

"No," replied an educated Hindu. "But a united India is our ideal, partition would not solve the question of minorities. These would remain in both the States."

"Hindustan and Pakistan would each guarantee the safety of their own minorities."

"Pakistan exists only in your imagination," said a Hindu. "It will never be."

"Is that so ?" exclaimed the Muslim. "We'll show you !"

The atmosphere was tense and Habib intervened, but arguments were raging anew everywhere.

This time, however, Zohra and Sughra did not quarrel, for they were both depressed at the turn events had taken. The past year had brought them closer together, for Zohra had come to realize that people cannot be coerced and they must have their right of self-determination, and Sughra had begun to believe that the achievement of Pakistan was not enough, that it was equally essential to build it into a free and

democratic State where Muslims as well as non-Muslims may attain happiness and prosperity.

Both were indignant at the parting remarks of the British Prime Minister who had blamed the Indian people in rude and unjust terms.

"Who are they to preach," said Zohra, "they who have always tried to divide and rule, they who have plunged the world into war ? Besides, during the negotiations, under pressure from British big business and officials, the British shifted positions many a time and, as the days went by, it seemed as if less and less power was to be given to the Indian people !"

"Quite," agreed Sughra, "but all the same they have tried to justify themselves before the world."

"Because we are fools ! Why don't we get together now, accept their challenge and draw up our own scheme? They'd have to accept it."

"Quite, but if the Hindus would only recognize our right to self-determination."

"I agree with you there and I do think that the main reason for the Hindu rejection of these proposals has been their failure to rise to the occasion and recognize that right. If they had done so, then the Hindus and the Muslims could together have demanded constitutional rights for the States' people, control of the defence of India and Cabinet status for the interim Government, which were the other Hindu demands."

"Let the Hindus agree to the principle of Pakistan, and then we'll show you how the Muslims can fight for freedom."

But the Hindus and the Muslims remained apart, and although people of goodwill once more made efforts towards a settlement, nothing happened and the country sank deeper and deeper into the slough of despair.

Everywhere men and women expected the leadership of the country to rise to the occasion, to smooth their differences and to meet the crisis. They felt that the British plan had serious drawbacks and that it did not propose to give sufficient or immediate power to the Indian people. They knew that a united Indian demand at this juncture would force Britain to part with power, but the political leadership remained disunited.

Sughra could see that Zohra was suffering from a sense of frustration and disillusionment so deep that even her personal troubles were over-shadowed.

"Cheer up !" she said to her one day, "and hope for the best."

"Oh Apa, you don't know how it is. For so many years I've believed and trusted in the Hindu leadership, and they should have risen to the occasion. They should have accepted the principles of self-determination. I'm so unhappy."

"That won't help, Zohra."

"I feel I never want to do anything again."

"But your people need you."

"But how shall I work ? What shall I work for ?"

"Listen Zohra, Pakistan is now inevitable. But we want it to come peacefully."

"Heavens ! Don't I agree there ? Whatever comes, let it come peacefully."

"And in the Punjab a clash is coming soon between the Unionists and the Muslim Leaguers."

"I'm with you there."

"And you believe in self-determination ?"

"Yes."

"You also sympathise with the Muslim women's struggle for their rights ?"

"Oh yes !"

"Then don't you see your place is in the Muslim League ?"

"Oh, you daze me."

"We need you, Zohra. We need workers like you with energy and ideals. Your people need you."

"But, Apa ! I would be out of place."

"Nonsense, the doors of the Muslim League are open to all. It's a national organization. People of all ideas are there—socialists and democrats, fascists and communists, maulvis and modern men."

"And ?"

"They've joined together for a national ideal, the achievement of Pakistan, or in other words if this pleases you better, the right of the Muslim people to assert their will in their home-lands where they are in majority."

"But I've nothing in common with some Muslim

Leaguers. Some of them are full of reaction."

"Quite. But what had you in common with the Hindus, the representatives of big business and the fascist sympathisers ?"

"You are right there."

"And the League needs sincere workers to make it a living democratic peoples' organization, and Pakistan will need people like you to make it a peoples' State."

"I see what you have in mind. But will your leadership help you to attain that goal ?"

"I have full confidence in the Quaid-i-Azam, and for the rest, many will go, they will fall by the way-side, the chaff will be separated from the wheat. And some day we shall attain our ideal of a peoples' Pakistan."

"And you think that you can help in the process."

Zohra smiled and said nothing, but a new idea had entered her mind.

Zohra had not seen Ahmad or heard from him for a fortnight and she was worried. During this period, Sughra had met him twice and told him that Zohra's determination to marry him had not faltered, and that she, Najma and Habib had decided to support her. She had asked him to meet Zohra and to talk things over with her, but he had persistently refused.

"I shall not rush her into anything," he said, "and I want to leave her alone for some time. She must think over everything coolly and calmly, and then decide."

"And meanwhile ?" Sughra had asked him.

"Meanwhile I shall go away to Amritsar. I'm taking up another job there."

"You won't see her even once ?"

"No."

"Ahmad, you are hard !"

"You think so ? You forget many things. Zohra is a daughter of the Sheikh family, rich and spoilt, yet she wishes to link her life with mine. And I'm a poor man. I love her and want her to be my wife. But I'll not force her in any way. Besides, I'm indebted to the Sheikh Sahib for many things, and I would hate to hurt him."

"I don't quite understand. Do you or don't you wish to

marry Zohra despite the difficulties ?"

"I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear. Of course, I am eager and anxious to marry the woman I love, but she must come to me of her own accord, knowing all the difficulties she may have to face and willing, even eager, to share my life and my work. I'll not try to persuade her or coerce her in any way. I'll not make an effort to take her away from her family. I'll leave her in peace to make her own decision, and then, if she still wishes to come to me, I'll be there waiting....with open arms."

Later he had telephoned Sughra and told her that he was leaving for Amritsar and since that day they had not heard from him.

In Zohra's mind there was no conflict or confusion. She was determined to marry Ahmad and nothing could shake her in her resolve. She felt that her parents were narrow and unreasonable in their objections, and that they were being unduly influenced by their relations. She was sad at the thought of hurting her father and her mother and being estranged from them, but was confident that once she was happily married, her parents would change their opinion and a reconciliation would follow. It was Ahmad's silence that worried her. She knew that he was sometimes hard, even harsh in his judgment and she was fearful at the thought that his prejudice against the spoilt child of a rich family may overcome his love, and he may decide to give her up. She need not have worried, for Ahmad in Amritsar was fretting almost as much as she was. But he kept a stern control over his feelings, for he knew that it was no easy matter for a girl, brought up as Zohra had been, to marry against the wishes of her family, and he was determined to let them exercise all their powers of persuasion against him, for he felt that he must give her a chance to change her mind, and that he owed it to Jamaluddin to give her a chance to change it. Outwardly, he was calm and collected as he went about his work, but the suspense was telling on his nerves and his mother noticed that he slept but little and hardly touched his food. He had confidence in Zohra and in her ability to carry out her resolve, but there were moments when doubt haunted him and he felt that she would never be able to stand up against the combined

weight of pride and prejudice that would be brought to bear upon her.

Then one day he received a telegram from Sheikh Jamaluddin : "Try reach Lahore earliest for important consultation." Mystified but hopeful, once again he took the first train to Lahore.

Zohra was sitting quietly in the drawing room and trying to read a book, but she could hardly concentrate on the words, for she felt restless and depressed and it seemed to her as if the whole world were enshrouded in gloom, when Sughra came into the room with a broad smile on her face.

"Who do you think is closeted with father in the study ?" she asked.

"Who ?"

"Guess !"

"I can't."

"Try."

"No. You tell me."

"Ahmad !"

"What ?"

"Yes. Ahmad."

"Oh ! You're not joking, or something," her voice faltered.

"Of course, not."

"But what's happened ?"

"Mother's very upset." Sughra was smiling again.

"But I don't follow. Why ?"

"She says that father's gone mad !"

"Apa ! You don't, you can't mean ?"

"Yes, he says he has decided to give his consent to your marriage."

"Really ? Truly ? I can hardly believe it."

"It's quite true. Mother told me."

"Oh Apa! I'm so happy !"

By now tears were trickling down her smiling face, and she hugged her sister impetuously.

"You baby !" laughed Sughra.

"But what has brought about this miraculous change ?" asked Zohra.

"He says that the spectacle of disunity in the country has

so disgusted him that he is determined to have unity in his own family at least, and if the young people will not give in to his wishes, he will give in to theirs."

"Well, I never! Oh, Apa isn't he wonderful?"

"Yes, he's always been rather wonderful."

The door opened and Sheikh Jamaluddin walked in, followed by Ahmad.

"Zohra"! he said. "I've brought some one to see you." And then she was surprised at herself, for a sudden shyness overwhelmed her and she could hardly raise her eyes.

"We've had a most satisfactory talk," continued her father, "and I've told Ahmad that I shall be happy to welcome him into the family."

"I'm deeply indebted to you, sir," said Ahmad and Sheikh Jamaluddin placed his hands on both their heads. "God bless you, my children," he said.

Zohra was crying unashamedly and she hugged her father. "Oh, you are the dearest, the most marvellous father in the world," she said.

"I agree with all my heart," said Ahmad.

Sheikh Jamaluddin smiled. "And now we'll leave you two as I'm sure you have a thousand things to say to each other," he said and making a sign to Sughra to follow him, he left the room.

Ahmad walked towards her with out-stretched arms.

"Zohra !" he cried.

"Oh Ahmad I'm so happy. I've been so depressed."

"I too."

"Really ?"

"More than words can say."

"I was so afraid ?"

"Why darling ?"

"I thought you'd give me up."

"Never ! But I thought you might change your mind."

"Impossible."

After some time he said: "Zohra, there is something I must ask you before you finally make up your mind."

'My mind's made up."

"But, you must be sure, dear. You must be sure that you want to be a poor man's wife."

"I'll be happy and proud."

"But that's not all....those months in prison have influenced me deeply, more than you can know. I feel that soon I may want to take up political work, probably Trade Union work. Then I may give up my job, and all I'll have will be about forty rupees a month."

"I'll have a job !"

He smiled.

"You couldn't expect me to live on your earnings."

"No, but I'll be able to support myself, and be no burden to you. Oh Ahmad, let's not think of these things. You can do whatever you like, but we shall be together, we'll face everything together. And that's what matters."

"You're brave, darling."

"When you are with me. Otherwise, I feel so lost ! But listen Ahmad, there is something I too must tell you."

"Yes ?"

"I have been feeling lost and depressed lately and it wasn't only our personal problems that made me so....it was the general depression. The political atmosphere, the war news, and just everything."

"I know, dear. All thinking people have been feeling unhappy."

"I've been feeling so futile, so useless. I can't just go on like this. I mean, I feel as if I'm living in an unreal world, so cut off from the people."

"Ah ! You have felt it at last. Zohra, I'm so glad !"

"I must do something. I too must take a more active part in politics."

"Oh, it's a splendid idea."

"But there's one thing," she hesitated.

"What is it ? Tell me."

"I want to work among women, especially among Muslim women. They need me most, that's where I'll be most useful."

"And so ?"

"I feel I should join the Muslim League."

"Ah !"

"It seems to me that today both the Congress and the Muslim League are national organizations. Each is fighting

for freedom against domination. In each there are all kinds of people having all sorts of ideas, but united for a national demand. The Hindus are fighting for the freedom of India, the League for the right of self-determination for the Muslims as well. Ahmad, I believe in this right, you have helped me to believe in it !"

"Go on !"

"Besides, the League, which was once the organization of the nawabs and landlords and the rich few only, has grown by leaps and bounds and today no one can deny that it is a peoples' organization. Lastly, I feel that I'll be more useful working among the Muslims, for I understand the problems that Muslim women have to face. Also, they know me and I know them. I have so many contacts, so many friends. For all these reasons, I feel I should be in the League."

"Zohra, as long as you are honest, and I know you are, it will not matter to me how you serve your people. But remember that you must serve your people. Take up political work if you want to, but work for principles and not for power or personalities."

"Oh Ahmad, I'll always work for principles. For the building of the great new democratic world that we both believe in, that so many men and women all over the world believe in."

"If you feel that your place is in the League and that you can best serve your people and your principles by being in that organization, well, then you must join the League."

"Thank you, Ahmad, I knew you'd understand."

"Only whatever happens, remain true to all the things you believe in. Don't ever be carried away by false slogans, however pleasant they may sound, and don't despair of unity. Zohra, I know how things are. But we must go on trying."

"On the basis of self-determination."

"Yes."

"I shall go on trying for that, come what may."

They both sighed, for the great hope seemed to be receding with each passing day.

"May we come in ?" It was Habib's voice, and then the door opened and her mother walked in followed by Habib and Najma and Sughra. Her mother clasped Zohra in her

arms, and Habib shook hands with Ahmad, while Najma and Sughra showered congratulations upon them both.

The servants brought in trays full of sweets and fruits and two of the maids came in with a *dholki* and began to sing a festive song.

Just then the door opened again and they looked up to see Vijay standing there with dishevelled hair and a wild look in his eyes.

"Come in, Vijay," said Habib, but he did not move, he just stood there looking hopelessly at them, and they were all silent, and even the song was hushed and the maids moved quietly out of the room.

"We have failed again," he said at last and they all bowed their heads. "I've just come from Delhi, and I saw it all—the bickering, the bargaining, the disunity, we are going apart; further and further apart." His voice was ringing like a bell in the soft light that fell from a ventilator straight on his face. He was so like Mohini that Zohra gasped and Najma clutched Habib's hand.

"And now ! Now even the principle of vivisection is taken almost for granted. Now you want to leave us, to break away, to become another land, another people. But I tell you, we shall try to keep you back with love."

There was a sob in his voice and Habib murmured : "Oh, Vijay, if only there were more like you. If they tried to keep us with love, perhaps we would not want to break away!"

"But you want to separate. Ah, can you not look into the future ?" He pointed as if into the distance and his eyes were haunted. "Look, it comes, nearer and nearer it comes—the separation and the shadow—the darkest hour, and the rift between us becomes a chasm - and the chasm a sea, a sea of blood and tears, of tears and blood !" His voice quivered and faded, and before they could stop him, he was gone.

Najma trembled and drew nearer to Habib, and Zohra caught Ahmad's hand in her own, but Sughra left her chair and walked rapidly away, like one in a dream. Straight to the open window of her room she came and looked out upon the Western sky to see high up on the horizon the crescent moon with its accompanying star sailing in a sea of pale-green, and she drew a breath of gladness and she whispered: "The herald

of Pakistan !" But her eyes dropped lower and the sunset surged into them in a flood of crimson and she shuddered and turned away.

Then, suddenly, she knew what she must do, and pulling out a suitcase from under her bed she began to pack.

The door-keeper, who sat in front of the ancient house in Multan, was surprised to see her and bowed and murmured a greeting, but she brushed past him and walked straight into the house.

She found him sitting at the table with books and papers strewn all over it. And he was holding his bowed head in both his hands as if to still an ache, an ache that was born of the slow, continuous, deliberate labour that he imposed upon it.

"Mansur!" she said gently and he looked up and his eyes widened and his lips quivered but no words eluded him again.

"May I sit down ?" she asked calmly and moved towards a sofa in the corner. He came and stood before her with questioning eyes, but still he said nothing.

"Mansur!" she said, "I think I would like to have another child !"

"Sughra ! You ! You don't mean ?"

"I do," and she smiled at him.

He fell on his knees before her, and he looked at her with incredulous eyes, and he was so like little Khalid that she drew a deep breath and put out her arms and drew the tired head close to her breast.

"Oh Sughra, my beloved, my beautiful. I have loved you for so long !" The words were coming rapidly now as though a dam had burst and the flood waters were rushing out. "And I have worked and waited and hoped and prayed that some day you would come back to me. That some day we would be together again. That I would touch your lips and smell the fragrance of your hair and hold you in my arms once more. For me you are the only one, there has never been any other woman, there never will be any other woman."

She stroked his hair and caressed his cheek. "Mansur, I'm not worthy," she whispered once again.

"You are the most wonderful woman in the world," he said.

"Dear prejudiced eyes."

"And you'll never leave me again."

"Never. My place is here. Oh, Mansur, I long to share your life and your work."

He lifted his head proudly and clasped her closer. "You shall, beloved."

Then she looked up at him with radiant eyes, and she said :

"Henceforth we shall go forward together, hand in hand, towards our goal."

"Towards Pakistan !" he said triumphantly.

THE LAST MAN

INTEZAR HUSSAIN.

Ilyasif was the last man in that village. He took an oath on God that as he was born in the shape of Man, so he would die. And he bent his efforts to the very last breath to keep that shape.

Three days earlier, it happened that all the monkeys in that village had disappeared. The people were at first puzzled, but later they rejoiced and said: "Lo, the monkeys are no more, nor will they eat our grain and ruin our orchards." But the man who had warned them not to catch fish on the Sabbath said: "The monkeys are still among us, although you cannot see them."

And the people became angry at his words, and they said: "Surely, you joke with us." And he said: "You have joked with God by fishing on the Sabbath. Verily, it is His turn to joke with you."

It came to pass that on the third day, the daughter of Ilyazir entered his bedroom, and in fear and dread she tiptoed out again. Then Ilyazir's wife went to his bedroom, and in great wonderment she came out again. Then the news spread far and wide, and from distant places people came to the house of Ilyazir. They went in dread to the bedroom where, instead of Ilyazir, a big monkey lay on the bed. And Ilyazir had caught the most fish on the previous Sabbath.

Then a certain man told another: "O friend, Ilyazir has become a monkey." And the friend laughed. "You joke with me," and, laughing, he went away. His face turned red, his

teeth grew long, the lineaments of his visage changed, and he became a monkey.

Seeing this, the first man stood amazed. And in wonderment, his mouth gaped wide open, his eyes grew bulbous, and he also turned into a monkey.

And when Ilyab saw the son of Zablun, he was sore afraid and said: "O son of Zablun, something ails you." The son of Zablun gnashed his teeth in anger. When he saw this, Ilyab was filled with great dread, and he said: "O, son of Zablun, I swear by your mother that something has happened to you." Then the son of Zablun's face turned red and he advanced towards Ilyab, grinding his teeth.

And the son of Zablun's face grew ugly with anger, while Ilyab's face grew ugly with terror. And in anger and fear they fell on each other. Their faces changed and their limbs changed. Then their voices became brutish and their words were lost in meaningless chatter. And they became monkeys.

Ilyasif was the wisest of them and he managed to remain a man longest of all. In perplexity he said: "O people, certainly some great evil has befallen us. Let us go and consult the man who warned us not to fish on the Sabbath."

So they went in search of the man but he could not be found. In a loud voice Ilyasif addressed the multitude: "O, people, the man who warned us not to fish on the Sabbath has deserted us today. Think well on this, a great evil has descended on us."

When they heard his words the people were terror struck. When he looked behind him, Ilyasif saw that they had turned into monkeys, and he nearly swooned with fear. Then he saw that those in front of him had become monkeys, and also those on both sides. He went from one end of the village to the other and saw that all of them had become monkeys.

The village was on the sea-shore. It had large houses with big doors and high plinths. He walked through the deserted streets, the empty market place, past the high, silent walls. And on those walls, and on the magnificent roof-tops, only the monkeys could be seen.

Ilyasif's blood began to freeze with fear when he looked about him and saw that he was the only man. But then he remembered how Ilyab had become a monkey through fear; so he controlled his fear. And he took an oath on God that as

he was born in the shape of a man, so he would die. And he was thankful that he had not become like his fellows.

He looked at their red, bloated faces and their hairy bodies with hatred and disgust. He felt his face changing, and he remembered how the son of Zablun had changed into a monkey through hatred; so he controlled his hatred.

Then he thought: "Verily, I was also one of them." And his heart swelled with love. He thought about the daughter of Ilakhzr, and of her large house surrounded by trees. The thought evoked the memory of how he had visited the large house the day before, and had seen the girl he loved, her long hair damp with the dew of night, a fawn pressed to her breasts, which were like small piles of wheat, and a round cup of sandalwood beside her. And with this in mind he went again to the large house surrounded by trees, and looked for the one he loved and called out: "O daughter of Ilakhzr, see how the heavy month has passed, how the world is fresh with flowers and trees. Where are you, O, daughter of Ilakhzr? Come and see the fawns and the doves in their lofty nests. Come and meet the man who loves you." He called out several times and then he wept for her.

But he remembered how the wife of Ilyazir had turned into a monkey because she had wept for Ilyazir. Then Ilyasif thought : "The daughter of Ilakhzr has become like those she loved. O, Ilyasif, do not love these people otherwise you too will become like them." He controlled his feelings of love and decided to deny all his links with his former fellow-men.

Then he looked at their red, bloated faces and stiff tails and he laughed. He thought of how Ilyazir's wife had been the village beauty, slim and straight like a cyprus tree, with breasts hanging full like bunches of grapes. And Ilyazir had told her that he would pluck the grapes. She had fled towards the sea-shore and he had followed and plucked the fruit; and he had taken the slim, straight sapling home with him. Now she sat there, picking lice out of his hair. Now Ilyazir would hoist himself upright with a branch, and she would sit on her mis-shapen haunches with one of his paws on her lap.

He began to laugh loudly, so loudly that he wondered at himself. Then he remembered the man who had become a monkey through laughing; so he checked himself.

Ilyasif had controlled his laughter, his love, his hatred, his anger and his sympathy. He tried to deny all his links with his fellows, with their meaningless gnashing of teeth, their stupid quarrels over fruit, and their pointless coming to blows. The same things had previously annoyed him and had made him weep or laugh, or look upon them with pity. It so happened that on seeing them fighting among themselves, he became angry and shouted loudly at them. He wondered at his own voice. Some of the monkeys looked at him with complete indifference before leaping once more into the fray. And the fact that his words had no meaning for them widened the gulf between them yet further. Ilyasif was filled with sorrow because his words now carried no meaning, that they had become like empty vessels in his hands. He fell to thinking that this was indeed a miserable day, the day on which the word had died. He grieved silently for the death of the word.

He sat in silence, having experienced and quickly rejected the whole gamut of emotion. He inwardly denied all relationship with the monkeys and became like an island, a remote speck of dryness in a vast sea. And the island said: "In the midst of deep waters, I alone will remain a speck of land, higher than my surroundings."

He built defences against the tides of love and hate, so that no strong current of emotion should sweep him away. He began to dread emotion. When he completed his defences, he felt something like a small stone in his breast. He began to worry about this and thought: "O Lord, am I about to change from the inside ?" Then he looked at his body and began to imagine that the small stone had begun to spread outwards also. He imagined hair on his body and could feel that hair turning into bristle. As fear seized him, he felt his head grow smaller and his limbs become shrivelled. His terror increased, and with it his limbs shrunk further. And he thought: "Shall I then shrivell completely away ?"

He remembered how Ilyab had become a monkey through fear, so he said to himself: "As I managed to control the fear which came to me from the outside, so I will control that which comes from the inside." So he controlled his inner fear, and his shrunken limbs now straightened and spread themselves. His joints opened out and he felt that his limbs would come apart so he clenched his hands together tightly, and tensed his

muscles.

He shut his eyes. But when he shut them he again felt that his limbs were changing their shape. He fearfully asked himself: "Am I not going to remain myself ?" He cautiously opened one eye and saw that his limbs had not changed. Then he boldly opened both eyes and looking calmly at his body, said to himself: "Without a doubt I have not changed." But soon after this he felt his limbs changing once more. So once more he shut his eyes.

His attention now turned inwards, and he felt as though he was being drawn into a dark pit. In sorrow he said: "O Lord, there is hell around me and hell within me." He began to recall the faces of his fellows and how they would catch so many fish that even the plentiful ocean had begun to get empty, and how their greed had waxed so much that they even went fishing on the Sabbath. Then the elder who had warned them not to fish on the Sabbath had said: "In the name of He who made the deep water of the ocean, and Who filled it with fish, the sea must be given a rest from your unbridled rapacity. Do not fish on the Sabbath, else some evil will befall you." Ilyasif had sworn on God that he would not fish on the Sabbath. So, being a very clever man, he had dug channels from the sea leading to deeper wells, into which the fish had swum on the Sabbath. The next day he had caught all that fish. When the elder saw this he had said: "He who attempts to deceive God will be deceived by God. And God's deception will be a great one." When Ilyasif remembered this he was seized with remorse. He felt now that his whole being was a deception, and he called out: "O Lord, who gave it me this fair shape, who made it me in Thine own image, wilt Thou now desert me, that I should become a base monkey ?"

He thought about the calamity which had befallen him and he wept. The defences he had erected began to crumble and the water of the deep sea flowed in towards the dry land.

Weeping about his fate, he left the abode of the monkeys and turned towards the jungle. Like the word, those houses and high walls had become meaningless. He spent the night hidden on the branch of a tree.

When he awoke next morning, his whole body was aching and his spine was bent in agony. He looked at his distorted limbs and to his fevered imagination they seemed to be even

more distorted. He thought: "But I am still myself. I wish there were one other man in the village to whom I could show myself." Then he asked his conscience whether it was necessary for a man to live among men. And the reply came that it was, that a man must live and die among those to whom he was born. And when he heard this reply, his soul overflowed with sorrow, and he called out: "O daughter ofIlakhzr, where are you ? I am desperately lonely without you ?" With this came the strong memory of the trembling fawn, the little hillocks of wheat, the round cup of sandal wood ; and the water of the deep sea lapped further into the island. And he called aloud: "O daughter of Ilakhzr, this I swear, by the large house surrounded by trees, by the pigeons as they wheel in their high circles in the sky, by the dews of the night and by night's darkness and by sleep when the eye-lids grow heavy that I will look for you on the highest mountain and in the deepest forest. Come to him who loves you !" And, in the agony of his isolation, a lot of the words became garbled with each other; as though chains were tightening around his tongue ; as though the words were being erased ; as though his voice itself were changing.

He thought carefully about this change in his voice, and remembered the way in which the voices of the sonsof Zablun and Ilyab had changed just before they had become monkeys. He was deeply afraid and said: "O, Lord, must I also change?" Then he felt a strong desire to see a reflection of his face, and he felt that the desire could not be easily fulfilled, so he said: "O, Lord, how shall I know that I have not changed ?"

At first he thought of returning to the village, but he decided not to. The tall houses of the village repelled him, while the tall trees of the forest seemed to draw him towards themselves. For fear that he might be too close to the village, he went deeper and deeper into the forest. He came across a lake of calm water. He drew close to the bank and refreshed himself with a drink. Then he happened to look into the water. "Is this me ?" His scream of terror echoed back at him. And he ran away.

He felt as though the lake was pursuing him. The soles of his feet became sore and began to flatten out. His back began to ache, but he ran on and the ache became greater. It became so great that he felt as though his spinal column

would break in two. Suddenly his back bent and, willy-nilly, he placed his palms on the ground.

With his paws on the ground, Ilyasif ran rapidly in all directions, sniffing the air, looking for the daughter of Ilakhzr.

Translated from the original Urdu by RIAZ HASSAN

AFTER THE DEFEAT

SYED SHAMSUL HAQ

Dear brother, if you were not so kind to me, I think, the neighbours would have thrown me out on the streets last night. I was reeking with liquor and you were surprised to find me so. For, you considered me an exceptional young man who wouldn't ever raise his voice, nor look at girls, let alone drink. I thank you now, for, you did not get angry when I came back miserably drunk, shouting, waving my arm and sprawled on the floor to vomit. I vaguely remember your washing my head with cool water and then tucking me in bed.

Well, I think I owe you a confession. I suppose, I should tell you what had happened.

I had no particular place to go to in the evening and I thought I would take a good long walk. Usually, I did that if I had nothing to do. I chose a solitary road—the one that begins from the Circuit House and leads past the President's House to join Mymensingh Road.

I was close to the back wall of Ramna Park when I saw two youngmen fighting for their lives under a tall tree. One had a neatly pressed white shirt on and the other's shirt was a sparkling blue. Another youngman, apparently their common friend, stood at a distance and watched them with awe. His hair was closely cropped. Around them few passers-by had gathered and they watched too.

I was bewildered ; it was simply hard to believe. Both the youngmen looked well-bred, decent and educated, though I could not reason out what led them to fight in public. I

was surprised to find that not one soul moved a finger to separate them. Instead, they closed in to enjoy and one of them shouted an encore as a whack of blow was heard.

The White shirt had punched the Blue shirt in the abdomen. He growled with pain, leaped off the ground and balanced himself again in defence. His jaw hung and saliva dripped from the corner of his swollen mouth.

The White shirt drew in his breath hoarsely. His lips were cut and blood streaked there. Perhaps, before I came, he had lost one or two of his teeth.

All of a sudden he sprang on the Blue shirt. Like a lightning he landed on him. He reminded me of a village-boy climbing a betel-nut tree with a swift swing. At that, the man who wore his hair closely cropped moved back three steps and I pushed in closer. Someone whispered at my back : 'Stop the White shirt. He will kill him !'

No one took notice of him but the word 'kill' acted as a trigger for me. I was instantly dazed, the world obliterated itself before me except the two men fighting, clasping each other in death-embrace, both trying to throw the other off his balance.

Blood rushed into my head and my whole body arched forward with concern.

The White shirt grabbed the Blue shirt's neck and with straining fingers tried to squeeze him out of his breath. As he did so he grinded his teeth and muttered a four-lettered word. Blue shirt's eye-balls popped out and his vein leaped to throbbing visibility on the neck. He kicked his legs as though he was pedalling an invisible cycle.

I was angry with him because he couldn't do better. 'Buck up,' I shouted at the Blue shirt and clapped my hand. Ripples of laughter passed through the crowd. But I had hardly any sense left to feel the sting of their mockery.

I could feel my fingers turning into a pair of cast-iron fists, my teeth grinded away anger and breaths quickened. I shouted again: 'Buck up.'

I wouldn't know if it really worked. An instant later the Blue shirt seemd to gain a sudden, frightening strength. He pulled up the White shirt off the ground and threw him down.

Some seven years ago, I witnessed a prize-fight between

Goga and Kid Zamboa at the Stadium. I saw Kid being caught like a rat by Goga, twisted under the clamp of his arm-pit. Then some muscles worked somewhere, and like a spring released Kid leaped aside. He stood frozen in anger as Goga twitched on the ground.

Goga and Kid fought again in my memory, complete in every detail and were gone the next moment, leaving my spirit high.

I expected the Blue shirt to jump and sit on the White shirt who still remained lying on the ground. But the Blue shirt was an ass and before he could move, the White shirt sprang to his feet again. He proceeded slowly with his arm out-stretched menacingly, apprehending every moment a sudden move from his opponent.

I trembled with pity and fear and murmured : 'God, save him, please buck up Blue shirt !' But he was an ass and fell on his face as the White shirt hit him under the chin with his head. The White shirt knew his game and instantly sat on the Blue shirt's abdomen and hit him again, and slapped and cursed him. Foam came out of the Blue shirt's mouth. He pleaded mercy, shielded himself in vain and was hit again. The White shirt danced on his limp body, slapped him hard once more and spat in contempt. You couldn't even hear a groan from the Blue shirt.

Suddenly, I felt the sun piercing and blinding me. I surged forward, grabbed the White shirt by his collar and jerked him up on his legs. Surprisingly, he felt my hand extremely weak and placid.

It made me angry even more. I pushed him back with another jerk. It was too sudden for him to muster a resistance. He fell on his bottom with a ridiculous thud. I stepped forward and lurked above him, alert and full of hate. But he didn't rise for a long moment.

Meanwhile, the Blue shirt gathered himself up and staggered out. I could see him, with the corner of my eyes, wiping his face and fumbling to light a cigarette. He looked miserable. I felt pity for him and was happy to over-power the White shirt. I congratulated myself on my victory and basked in its warmth.

Perhaps, I was forgetful for a moment. For, in that

fraction of a second, the White shirt was not only on his feet again, he landed on my jaw a fierce blow. Before I could perceive the impact, my eyes burnt with pain and moistened. I couldn't see him clearly for what seemed an infinity and I blinked.

Brother, I weigh only eight stone and never was much of a fighter. My brothers, even the younger ones, called me coward and their greatest fun was to chase me out of my breath.

Brother, imagine me, who never fought in his life, who never knew how to clench a fist or whack a blow, now stood face to face with a man who obviously displayed skill and power. I could see his teeth, bared with hatred, yellow and decayed, his nose fluttering and eyes narrowing with a sinister decision. I blinked again and like a man hypnotized watched him growing big with anger.

This man, I said to myself, was the enemy of my life, my very existence ; the incarnation of all that I hated and was afraid of and wanted to escape from. I breathed deep and thought this was the day of my doom.

Then I felt the surging of a strange power within. Gradually it made me forget my past, my weakness, people around me, the blazing sun and the rolling green grass where we stood. Nothing mattered to me at that moment except him.

Brother, I didn't know how I had done the deed. All I remember, I stood victorious over the White shirt, so beaten that he couldn't even rise to his feet again. He writhed like a centipede, grew still for a while and then writhed again—as though in a slow-motion movie-shot. Then he didn't move at all.

I looked around and found the crowd had grown bigger. The man who had his hair closely cropped was on my left and I couldn't find the Blue shirt anywhere near. I was disappointed a little that he was not there. Two men helped the White shirt on to his feet. He hung his head low and fought for breath.

My whole body ached. As the excitement wore on, pain returned. I looked at my palms, blood-stains cracked, and my head weighed a ton on my shoulder. Yet, I was happy. I found myself strangely elevated than the others as I began

to repeat to myself: 'I have won ! I have won ! I have won !'

But I didn't allow myself a smile of victory. I wouldn't know why. I could feel my face growing immobile as a stone, feigning a grim expression, perhaps to impress on others my superiority.

I kept my head erect and motioned to go. Then I remembered something, and stopped before the man who wore his hair closely cropped. I asked him : 'What was the fight for ?'

Till now he was silent and uneasy and now that he was asked, he broke into a sudden animation and replied: 'I warned him earlier, you know. I said friends do not fight. But they wouldn't hear. I knew it was coming, long before, Mister.'

'But why did they fight ?' someone craned his neck from behind the crowd and demanded.

The man who wore his hair closely cropped shook his head vaguely, coughed reflectively, and observed : 'Woman, brother, is capable of destroying an empire.'

Immediately the crowd closed around him smelling a scandal, and pressed him for the full story, and as the men pushed one another to be within the nearest ear-shot, I was elbowed out of it.

Yet, I heard what he told, every word of it.

The White shirt had a young sister, he said, for whom the Blue shirt had an evil design in his mind. Both the shirts were intimate friends and the man who wore his hair closely cropped was a friend too. The Blue shirt confided his lust to this man several times. He warned him always, for, he considered it a sin that God would not forgive.

But the crowd could care less for what he thought or what God would not do and were impatient to get on with the story. So he continued : 'Now yesterday the Blue shirt asked the girl out. She agreed, poor thing. You know, she considered him as her brother. She went with him to his apartment where he stays all by himself. He lured her into his bedroom ; well, she came back and spilled everything to the White shirt, her brother.'

My God, I growled. My head began to swim as I realised I had fought for a man who should have been condemned. My God, I gasped. I had knocked down a man who was

actually wronged.

Brother, it was as though I had stumbled on a block of stone and tripped over. It tripped me of my glory and a merciless sense of guilt began to lash me.

I slipped out of the crowd like a thief lest they, who two minutes earlier thought me a hero, should mock. I could see the crowd pressing closer around the man who wore his hair closely cropped for more details.

Brother, I fought for a man who should have been condemned. I knocked a man who was wronged. I walked and walked and I was tired and even then I walked.

Moon came up as the night came and the street-lights sparkled with life. In alliance they seemed to jeer at me and shone hard, bursting with a cruel laughter in unison.

It was then that I remembered, somewhere, in some novel I had read about a man, the hero, who lost everything and took to drinking. And finally that killed him, though he remained a hero, died a hero.

As I walked more the idea sank in more deep. I thought of the hero, name forgotten. I thought of drinking and walked more.

Brother, for the first time in my life, I got drunk last night.

Translated from the original Bengali by ALI AHSAN

DESCENT

MUMTAZ SHIRIN

He looked up.

A long flight of stairs led up, broad, white and shining. White stairs leading to the white rooms upstairs, which were bathed in light, the light up there.

They stood at the foot of the stairs. He and she. He looked up at the long flight. No, she couldn't climb all these steps in her condition.

He said tenderly: "Let me carry you. You can't go up."

She blushed and shook her head. "No ! No ! Fancy carrying me all the way up....and people looking on."

"I don't care !" He stretched his arms towards her. But she pushed them aside protesting: "I can go up the stairs by myself."

"All right, then, I'll just hold you for support." He put his arm round her shoulders and held her tight.

Together, they climbed the stairs, step by step.

The steps, broad, white, shining, led up to the white room upstairs. There was light up there, in the maternity ward, where Life was born.

Pain shot through her, now, at short intervals. A few steps up and the pain became more intermittent and more severe, through her spine, her lips, her belly. Cold shivers ran down her whole body, beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead. He took out a handkerchief and mopped her face. "It will be over soon," he murmured tenderly. He held her close. "Just lean on me, put all your weight on me.

There that's right. It will ease you." She closed her eyes and let her head fall on his shoulder.

Step by step, they came up.

The nurses took her in, he was asked to wait outside. He sat on a bench outside. It all seemed too sudden. He hadn't expected it. It was rather early. She was early. She was all right that evening. He came home, as usual, dead tired and she greeted him with a tender, soothing smile. She was pained to see him dispirited and worn out. As usual she brought the pitcher and poured water as he washed his face and hands. What a dutiful wife ! Feelings of love and gratitude surged up in his heart. He wished her to sit by him and talk to him, talk to him of the old happy days. But she said he should have his supper first, he looked so weak and exhausted. She laid the supper. He and the children sat down to their meagre meal. She went into the kitchen perhaps to see if there was anything else to give them. And then—he saw her clutch the door and sink on to the threshold. He left his food and ran to her, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. He asked her anxiously what the matter was. But she wouldn't tell him. It was always so with her. She tried to conceal her pain from him. But he could feel her pain. Again and again he saw her face distort with pain. And then she had to tell him that 'it' had started. He rushed her there.

He hoped all would be well. How she had shivered in his arms as he brought her up the stairs. She must be suffering so terribly. She was so weak. There was hardly any strength left in her. Would she come out alive from this life and death struggle ? Pain gripped his heart as he sat there waiting.

And she lay there, in the labour ward. The pains were now unbearable. Her eyes bulged out, she bit her lips hard. But she didn't let a cry escape her lips. For he would know by her moaning that she was suffering terribly and he would suffer too. She didn't utter a sound, she just suffered and suffered, until she could suffer no more. She lost consciousness.

He stood by the closed door. A madness had taken possession of him. He paced up and down ; then he came

back and sat on the bench fidgeting restlessly. He stared into empty space with eyes that seemed not to see. But he strained his ears hard to catch a moan, a cry from the labour ward. Not a sound could be heard from there. All was still. Did it mean ! He was stabbed in the heart. "O God ! Let her live just this once." He prayed silently from the depth of his soul. They said that while a new life was being born out of her, the mother's own life was near extinction. He strained his ears again. All was still as before. Maybe she was bearing with it patiently. She had borne it patiently, always. Maybe she was alive, she was all right.

He sat on the bench ; waiting, waiting, it seemed to him, endlessly. Time stood still. The suffering, the pain, the torture of a lifetime was wrung in these few moments.

And, inside, she lay still unconscious....it was a very tiny baby. Before the cord was cut from its navel, it was no more. Slowly, she gained consciousness. She didn't ask about the baby. Some hidden, unknown, vague feeling, the 'sixth sense', had warned her that it was dead. The nurses comforted her. She shouldn't worry, it was always so with babies born in the eighth month, they rarely lived. A nurse brought the baby and held it for her to see. Slowly, she turned her head sideways. Just a look at that tiny pale face, tiny lifeless body, and two silent tears flowed down her cheeks. And the warm flow of motherly love that had surged up in her breast anew, froze within her.

The door opened and a nurse came out. He jumped to his feet and stared madly at the nurse. The nurse told him the baby died as soon as it was born. He shouldn't worry. It was always so with babies born in the eighth month. But he wasn't thinking of the baby. Only if she was alive. Was she ? The nurse went on: "You shouldn't worry; you see, those babies rarely live."

"My wife."

"Your wife ? Well, get her a cup of coffee. It will revive her a bit."

Coffee for his wife ! So she was alive.

When he brought the coffee, he saw that she had been taken to another ward. She lay there quietly on the bed.

He stood by her and watched her pale weak body.

"How are you feeling now ?" he asked her, softly taking her cold, perspiring hand in his.

She smiled faintly. "I am all right. But this time I am too weak, you know. Every joint in my body aches."

They didn't speak of the baby. He thought it was better so. She was saved, and that was all he had wished for.

The next morning he went to the hospital. He took the children with him, too. She smiled at them. The children gathered round their mother's bed. He sat by her, holding her hand in his. She caught the anxious look in his eyes and pressed his hand reassuringly. Her eyes rested on his face. There was a wealth of tenderness and affection in them. Love, devotion and silent worship.

They had no physical attraction. He or she. His loose, clumsy clothes dangled about his dark, bony form. She wore coarse, discoloured clothes. She had lost her figure having borne many children. They were both worn out by hard work. They had no looks. Poverty had snatched away what little charm youth had given them. Once wheat-brown, he had turned quite dark now. His cheeks had sunk in. She had a very pale yellow complexion, dark rings around her eyes sunk deep in their sockets. Hardly twenty-five, she looked aged, already. She was just wasting away.

There was something other than beauty, a force stronger than physical attraction that had drawn them so together.

The elders had joined their hands according to religious rites and from then on they belonged to each other. And she knew she ought to love her husband. He was her lord, she should worship him ; and she loved him, worshipped him and devoted her life into his service.

And he was aware that a weak, delicate being was given to his care, that he should protect her and support her. This weak being would share her life with him ; she would be the mistress of his house ; the mother of his children. And thus their hearts came together. Long communion had tended to make them what they were, it had deepened their affection and love for each other. And the children born of their love cemented the bond.

The children could feel, too, that all was not well with

their mother. Anxiously they enquired : "Mother are you not well ?" They felt her forehead. "It is fever." And the youngest one said so touchingly: "Where it is, that you are feeling pain, Mum, show me ; I will kiss you there and the pain will go." He kissed her arm, "here, Mum ?"

She seized her little one, and clasped him to her heart. She felt so very, very happy. How they loved her ; her little ones, her own, flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood. She had given them her life-blood to make them grow. These little beings who had taken their shape and their life within her womb. She sighed as she thought she had not created life, this time.

After all, what else was there in her dreary, miserable life? Poverty, starvation, misery, grief, pain ; but for the children who loved her, the husband who cared for her. Yes, this was the treasure of her life.

The visitors' time was out and they had to leave. She followed them with her eyes as they passed out of the door of her ward.

The next morning he found her lying quiet and calm. But she was paler than ever. Her face was yellow, as if turmeric water had been sprinkled on it. It looked as though all the blood had been sucked from her body.

A nurse came in and picking her thumb took out a drop of her blood. Absorbing it on a paper she examined the percentage of haemoglobin in her blood. The Lady Doctor came in just at that time and examined it too.

"Fifteen per cent, just fifteen per cent!" The doctor turned almost furiously on him. "Can you perceive the danger your wife is in ? Fifteen per cent haemoglobin ! Can you imagine that? You never gave her Liver-extract injections, never gave her tonics during pregnancy. And when she is beyond all hope of recovery, you bring her here. And, I suppose, you'll blame us for her death."

Every word of the Lady Doctor fell like a hammer stroke on his heart. He did not love his wife ? He did not care for her ? He never gave her tonics and injections ? A petty clerk. How could he afford tonics and injections for his wife ? And she was reduced to this condition. She was near death, near death ! Oh, what hell is poverty.

He wouldn't go by bus to his office, but walked all the way. He left smoking his cheap cigarettes. And with a few annas that he saved thus, he brought fruits. He borrowed money and paid for her injections.

But she lay there pale and weak as ever, almost deathly pale. Her face was bleached white. Her body was cold and numb. Warm leather gloves and stockings were drawn on her hands and legs. Hot water bottles and bags were kept under her feet. One could feel the presence of something invisible hovering over her. Some foreboding of death.

Yet, she always had a faint, reassuring smile for him. As he sat by, looking at her, pain reflected in his eyes, he comforted her.

"You will get well. I shall take good care of you. I shall give you tonics and fruits. I am saving money, you know." And very sadly she smiled at him.

"Yes, I shall get well."

A ray of hope. Maybe this hope would keep her candle of life still burning. But the next moment he realized that her smile was a forced smile, her eyes had a far-away look.

And then came the critical night. Her calm gave away to groans. That night she moaned and groaned, ceaselessly, piteously. He saw the crisis coming. He begged of the nurses and doctors to let him stay with her, that one night. They didn't listen to his entreaties. That was against the hospital rules. Moreover, it wasn't Special Ward that anybody could be allowed to stay with the patient! A nurse came in and gave her tablets for sleep. She shouted at her brutally. "Can't you be quiet ? You are groaning horribly. Don't you realize the patients in other wards are disturbed?"

The patients in the "other wards". Why couldn't she come out with the whole truth ? The patients in the "Special Wards", the chosen few and this treatment was meted out to him because he was poor, he was not of "the chosen few". He thought bitterly as he trotted home. Her groans haunted him. And as he lay wide awake, staring at the ceiling, he could hear that piteous moaning all night long.

Next morning she was calm, again. Did it mean that the crisis was over? He thought hopefully. But the Lady Doctor

examined her and shook her head in despair.

"There is only one hope left."

"What is it, Doctor ?" he asked madly.

"Blood transfusion."

"Please examine my blood, Doctor. If it suits her."

Would he give his blood, this lean lanky man, he seemed to have very little of it himself. But his beseeching, melting look seemed to answer, he would.

"I can give any quantity of my blood, if it could save her life."

A few cc's of blood were drawn from his body and transfused into her body. As her husband's blood, every drop of which contained the warmth of his love, passed through her veins, she gained a little warmth. She seemed to revive. He touched her hand. It was warm ! It was warm ! He bent over her and whispered, softly: "You will recover now, surely."

She gave him a warm smile. She had understood everything. She thanked him with her eyes, and opened her lips to say something. Her lips trembled ; she turned blue, and her whole body passed through violent convulsions. For a time it lay lifeless. And again convulsions shook it all over. She dug her nails in the sheets. He caught hold of her and bent over her. She wished to say something. But her lips just parted and trembled. Perhaps she was asking for her children. In his dismay, this thought flashed in his mind. He asked his neighbour's wife, who had come along with him, to go and get the children. Their house was not far off. They were soon brought there. She looked at them one by one. She tried to stretch her arms out towards the youngest one ; but her arms fell, lifeless. She looked at him for the last time, as though she were bidding him goodbye.

And, then, all was over.

Beating his head he called out to her, by her name, again and again,. But soon he realized he was in the hospital. He shouldn't behave thus. And then there were the children. He should keep calm before them. He let himself fall on a chair. The children stood by their father's chair, and stared at the body of their mother. The mystery of death was

beyond their understanding.

He sat staring at her too, as the nurses were laying a white sheet. on her. White sheets, and a face as white as these sheets. White face and thick black hair falling on her shoulders. He stared and stared.

He was oblivious of his surroundings. Faintly, very faintly he caught a few words that were being spoken around him. It was the Lady Doctor who was saying. "It is too late in the night. You may take the body home, tomorrow. Meanwhile the corpse will be laid in the mortuary. We are sorry, we couldn't save her life. And you can pay the bill later."

And the women, who bore the corpse down, were shrieking: "We shan't take it down, unless we are paid first."

And he heard the nurses saying to each other: "After all, we have seen so many deaths here: it never gave us a fright to see a dead body. We are used to this. But look at her ! Don't you feel some thing?"

They were insulting her even in death.

Suddenly, he got up and lifted the body in his arms. Somebody brought forward the stretcher. He pushed it aside. And passing by all who stood staring at him astonished and shocked, he carried her body to the stairs leading down to the backyard.

A few days back, how many days was it, he had brought her up the stairs, supporting her, holding her tight, he had made her ascend the stairs, and now, bearing her lifeless body on his arms, he was going down.

There was life in this body once. Why, there was life in it only even a few moments ago. Now it was cold and stiff and heavy in death. He had loved this body, loved it for ten years, and now she was lost to him for ever. How often had he carried this body in his arms, when it was light and soft and warm. She was barely fourteen when she came to him as a bride. His mother was alive then. She made her work all day. When his mother was out visiting relatives, they had a gay time. He would lift her in his arms and whirl her round. Those happy days had came to an end too soon. Hard work and child-bearing had made her very weak; she was constantly ill. He asked her not to work hard, but

she wouldn't listen to him. When she was at her work, he would go behind her stealthily, lift her up gently, and lay her on her bed so that she might rest. Yes so often. And now he was bearing this body in his arms for the last time.

He was bearing her down, down the stairs. The stairs were narrow and dark. There was darkness all about him. The darkness of night, the darkness of death. The steps seemed never ending. A long way down ! down ! down ! A long descent. The last descent.

Translated from the original Urdu by The Author.

HIS LAST AZAAN

ALTAF GAUHAR

Hudiara is a small village in the Harike Sector on the India-Pakistan border.

Inhabited by a couple of thousand people, Muslims and Christians, its peace was disturbed in the early hours of September 6, when the Indian Forces launched their treacherous attack on Pakistan.

The village has a small Union Council office, a primary school, and a mosque. While the guns were booming, the old Imam of the mosque woke up. It was time for the morning "*azaan*". From a clay pitcher he took some water and performed his "wazoo", unconcerned with the noise around him. He stood on a pile of bricks in one corner of the mosque and raised his hands for the "*azaan*". His loud, melodious voice reached every hearth and home and the villagers still remember having heard it during a brief pause in the shelling.

A few people responded to his call, and when it was time, he led the morning prayers. The prayers over, they told him that the enemy tanks would soon be in the village and the population was being evacuated. He remained sitting on his straw prayer-mat, listening to advice which was becoming more urgent as the guns of the enemy drew nearer.

The first rays of light kissed the minarets of the modest mosque, brightened a corner and rested on the brow of the old Imam whose lips moved with the rhythm of the "*aayat*", which he was quietly reciting.

They told him that there was no time, and that they must go. He nodded and said : "Yes, you must go, if these are

the orders."

"You must come too," they insisted. He smiled and said: "I belong here." With his aged hand he stroked his white beard. "I am 71, and in these last moments I cannot abandon the mosque which has been my life." A shell hit one of the minarets, and the Imam got up and walked towards the heap of glazed bricks on which the words were still visible in astrange sequence. He picked up a piece and kissed it.

From the nearby primary school, Headmaster Idrees came rushing up and begged the Imam to come with him. "No, my son, this is where I stay."

"Then I stay too," said the Headmaster. "I have my school to look after."

During the day, the soldiers of the enemy came to the mosque in their muddy boots. "Take off your shoes," shouted the Imam, "before you enter the mosque." Whimsical old man, thought the soldiers, and walked up to the Imam. "We will spare your life if you tell us the position of the Pakistani Mujahids in this village. We will not touch your mosque." The Imam kept sitting and uttered not a word. The soldier hit him. "Speak, or I shall shoot you." The Imam looked at him and smiled. The soldier pulled out his revolver. "I give you one more minute to make up your mind." Seconds passed. The Imam got up and shouted at the top of his voice: "*Lailaha illallah Muhammad-ur-Rasool-ul-Allah.*" The infuriated soldier waited no more. At point-blank range he fired three shots. They pierced the frail body of the Imam He reeled and fell, his lips still quivering with the *kalma*, that there is one God, and Muhammad is His Prophet.

The Major told me this story, and pointed in the direction of village Hudiara. "Not a person," he said, "left the village until he was told to do so, but there were some whom nothing could persuade to leave." As the jeep travelled along a broken dusty village track, I saw a few hens and chickens moving merrily in a circle. The children clapped their hands as we passed them, and in a village tea-shop there were men, casually sitting on a wooden bench, unconcerned with all the bombing that had gone on.

"Great man, this Imam," said the Major.

"Yes," I could manage no more. In my ears was ringing the echo of his last *azaan*.

LIGHT OF A MILLION FLAMES

SAFDAR MIR

There is a ledge all round the platform on which he sleeps. Countless earthen lamps or wax candles burn on this ledge by day and by night, when millions from town and country flock to pay homage to the memory of "the humble *fakir* of the Lord," Shah Hussain. Whoever comes, adds another flame to those already burning. This is the only offering on this occasion. By mid-night, the whole ledge is one big flame surrounding the platform, so that you cannot burn and fix your particular candle on it ; you can only throw it into this riotous dance of flames, where it mixes, wax and wick, with the thousand upon thousands of others.

This symbolic communion, through the undistinguished, undistinguishable, one-in-many flame, is the core of *Mela Charaghan*. Every one who comes, must come through the urge to give up, to surrender, even if it be for a day or a few hours, the prison of identity, which he has accepted by having been born such or such. The prison is a sacrifice, and this freedom is a sacrifice. Both are acceptances of the life principle ; one given to reason,the other to the ecstasy of the dancing flames.

This grey-beard, with his tiny grandson riding his shoulder, has come from afar. He has come from a far away village with a number of his folk. He has prayed a lot in his life, as the *mehrab* of his brow shows, and has suffered a lot as the expression of his eyes discovers. He has tilled the soil day by day throughout his life, and reaped a number of certain or uncertain harvests....forty, fifty, sixty, who can tell ? .His

son and his grandson will go through this mill as his father and grandfather did before him. He throws his candle as the laughing child on his shoulder throws his, and their lives are one with the lives of their fathers ; and with the life of this "*Baba*", this father, who stands for all the fathers. They go round the tomb and depart, having added their flame to other flames, and taken their portion of light.

There is a swarthy thick-set man with long hair, clad in the typical dress of the peasants of the Chenab. His eyes are flaming red as he dances the last round of his *jhummar* in front of the door of the shrine. He comes here every year, dancing all the way from his small single room lodging on Jail Road. A peasant from a village from beyond the Chenab, he has settled down in Lahore, and works in a factory for his living. Every year he brings five tough drummers from his home village, who start beating the drum early in the morning as the five milelong dance starts from Jail Road towards the *mazar*. The drummers are masters of their art. They can vie with any *tabla nawaz* in the performance of any *taal* you may like to hear. The dancer is a master of all the folk dances. . . . *luddi*, *bhangra*, *jhummar*, *sammi*, *dhammal*. As he dances, others less accomplished join in; peasants and workers, care-free *malangs* and inhibited *Babus* start beating the ground with their feet. And the *taal* goes to their head. They do not have to learn to dance these rhythms ; they are in their blood, covered over with the dirt of puritanic inhibitions, which have taken away their joy of existence and replaced it with hypocrisy and the vulgarity of the product of our cinema studios and the pipe dreams from Hollywood and Bombay.

The dancer and the drummers bring out the real unconscious folk rhythms of the men from the village and the town. As they approach the *mazar*, the dancer sings *kabits* to the *dagga* of the drummer, and at the end of every piece shouts the name "Ali Haider", and then the dance begins all over again. As he whirls with ever increasing pace and smoothly beats the ground with his quickening *dhammal*, he punctuates the rhythm with his chant of "*ji o baba ji, ji o baba ji, ji o baba ji*" (Live, O Father, live) : this to the man sleeping on the platform. . . . who danced in the streets of Lahore more than 300 years ago in affirmation of the life principle in the midst of deadening shadows of orthodoxy.

In the crowd is a handsome young man with shining eyes. He is the son of a Nawab, and candidate for one of the administrative services of the country. He has lived and learnt the lore of the *Farangi* at Oxford, and speaks English with the fluency and accent of a Public School boy. But all this is not known to those who see him at the gate of the *mazar* of one who went to school only in Arabic and Persian, and then gave up both. He cannot be recognised because he is in his national dress....the flowing *kurta* and *laacha* and *patka*. He has come to the *mazar* to merge his terribly circumscribed and "proper" ruling class individuality in the ocean of existence. There is a hesitant look in his eyes as he goes towards the flame, a suspicion that perhaps he has not really shed his cocoon, not half burnt his boats.

But there is one who is a tall oldish man, bare of all save a loin-cloth. He has just joined the dancers in their *dhammal*. No one can say where he belongs ; whether he is a peasant or a worker or a *Babu* or an officer. He is free of all distinctions, expect the over-riding distinction of the mortal body ; and before he becomes dust, he seems to be wanting to become a flame.

The Nawab's son from the city cannot afford to become a flame ; nor do a number of other young men from his class who have accompanied him. They are clad in the same clothes as himself, undistinguishable from the peasant and the commoner. Here is one whose people have come all the way from Lucknow. He is a rare phenomenon, a pleasingly surprising phenomenon. He has come to pay homage to a saint of Lahore, with people who do not speak his tongue, who are beginning to fight for the right to speak their own, like Shah Hussain, who has become a symbol of the struggle to assert this right. This young man from the banks of Gomti has realised the oneness of the River, and the expanse of the Flame.

The most sorrowful individual, however, on this occasion of popular rejoicing is not the dull-witted and half-educated Urdu column writer. It is a lay observer of events, whose profound knowledge of history he betrays by comparing the mystic participation of millions of people in the ritual flames at the *mazar*, with the crowds who flock to industrial fairs and commercial exhibitions. The sensibility, or lack of it, of such individuals is a remnant of the mechanistic materialism of their

spiritual mentors, the Victorians, who supposed that science would take the place of the sense of the holy, with a few "sentimentalists" left to mourn or write about traditional religious rituals.

The strength of the ritual and its power for unifying the community can be gauged not only by realising that fairs like the *Mela Charaghan* can last 300 years, nor by looking around to see the workers and the peasants of industrial communities of Europe and Asia participating in them in the Age of Socialism, but also by looking within and trying to understand and sympathise with human beings, instead of merely making use of them for purposes of personal or political aggrandisement.

THE AGONY OF AN ECSTASY

HAMID JALAL

There is no such person as Uncle Manto in my everyday vocabulary and if someone were suddenly to ask me about him I would not immediately know that he was referring to my youngest maternal uncle. I call him Saadat *Mamajan*, for we speak to each other in Punjabi. That is the language he normally speaks at home, except for the children whom he is bringing up on Urdu, his medium of literary expression. He finds it a great strain to have long conversations in Urdu and he avoids this, almost as he does writing in Punjabi.

As my relationship with him implies, I need not be a Manto. In fact I am not one The fact is that even if I had been a Manto, I would not have used the family name, for it now belongs less to the family and more to the person who has already made it so well-known in Urdu literature. In the years to come, the name, Manto, is likely to be converted into an adjective to describe a literary trend or personality. It is not possible for me to set the exact date on which the Manto aspect of his personality began to assert itself, but, perhaps, I would not be far off the mark if I narrated an incident to show how it must have first manifested itself. He was not yet out of his teens when Master Khuda Bukhsh created a sensation in London by driving a car through Piccadily with his eyes blind-folded. Shortly afterwards, there appeared in Amritsar a fire-walker who claimed to be Master Khuda Bukhsh's tutor. His name, I think, was Allah Rakha. Thousands flocked every day to see him walk unscathed across a

shallow ditch full of glowing coals. One day he went a step further; he announced that anyone who had faith in God and him could also follow on his bare feet across the red-hot ditch without any ill effects. The crowd took one look at the tiny flames, quickly painting the coal red, and shrank back as if Master Allah Rakha would force them to follow him. He repeated his invitation but the crowd held back in hushed silence.

Then a young man stepped forward. He seemed to have waited only to make sure that no one else would make the attempt. As the crowd began to murmur, the lanky youngster, at Master Allah Rakha's bidding; took off his shoes and socks and rolled up his trouser-ends. "Draw in your toes and recite the *kalima* and follow me." The crowd had hardly got over its surprise, when Master Allah Rakha and the youngster had completed their journey over the burning coals. While the amazed youngster examined his feet for the non-existent burns and blisters, the crowd began to clap.

That was Saadat Hasan Manto's first public ovation. It was rather an unfortunate beginning of a public career, for Uncle Manto has been walking on fire ever since. He has had his share of public ovation, and a very big share it has been, but he has not always escaped the natural effects of fire. His public, however, seem to think that this is a part of the act and they watch with indifference while he makes half-hearted attempts to fight the flames that threaten to envelop him. I describe his attempts as half-hearted, because Uncle Manto seems to believe that fire-walking is a part of his public career as a writer and personality. Perhaps, subconsciously, he feels that he will have no public ovation if he does not indulge in feats that are as abnormal and dangerous as fire-walking.

I could even say that this sub-conscious fear is the key to his personality, but what holds me back is the fact that his personality has a very large number of facets and each calls for a separate unlocking device. A painstaking psychoanalyst could, perhaps, isolate, distinguish and list the various aspects of Uncle Manto's personality, but for me that task is very difficult. When I look back on my association with him, I feel that I am looking into a kaliedoscope; his literary activities, home life and behaviour as an alcoholic, forming the three sides of the mirror prism and our common experiences

representing the tiny fragments of coloured glass that form a new pattern every time the base is rotated.

To give a complete picture of Uncle Manto in this sketch is as impossible a task as copying out all the patterns that a kaliedoscope can produce. All I can do is to turn slowly the Manto kaliedoscope and describe and interpret the various personality patterns that are formed on the screen of my mind.

One such image that readily takes shape dates back to the days of his fire-walking exploit. I can see him in his study, at his writing table which is dominated by a huge brass motor car-shaped inkpot. He whispers to me and I go out, to return some time later, after his usual group of cronies has assembled for its daily sitting. He introduces me to a couple of new friends whom I have not met before, explains that I have just arrived from Lahore and anxiously enquires whether any further news has reached Lahore about the Taj Mahal. I was then not yet ten, but having been properly briefed some minutes earlier, I replied, with all the gravity I could muster: "Yes, the news is correct. Everybody in Lahore says that the Taj has been sold to the Americans." Uncle Manto and some of his more intimate friends pounced on this statement of mine and convinced a gullible new comer to their fold that the rumour they had earlier mentioned to him was correct. The Taj Mahal had been sold by the British to the Americans, who were rushing special equipment to Agra to remove the monument to New York. By next day, several bazars in Amritsar buzzed with this rumour, while Uncle Manto sat back in his study and chuckled.

In those days Uncle Manto revelled in such rumour-mongering and every rumour spread by him showed a creative mind at work. As a sort of side-line, he went about asking his friends to believe that his fountain pen was carved out of a donkey's horn and things of that kind. He was the leader of a young group of intellectuals of Amritsar and prescribed for them several new phrases and conversation styles to distinguish themselves from the general body of students.

Two of his expressions, which have gained wide currency these last twenty years or so, are his use of the words 'fraud' and 'kabab'. Today a large number of persons use the word 'fraud' as if it belonged to the Urdu or Punjabi languages and so far as Uncle Manto is concerned, he uses the word not to

describe an act but a personality. If anyone lets him down or annoys him, he has, to use Uncle Manto's expression, made a 'kabab' of him. His manner of speaking was interesting but confusing for the outsider. If he wanted to know what a person thought about his shirt or fountain pen he would ask: "What is your button about this shirt ?" or "What is your nib about this pen ?" The underlying reason, of course, was the urge to be different, to be independent of all traditions, to owe nothing to anybody; in short to be nothing else but Manto.

That, perhaps, was what led him to the bottle and it is even possible that his first drink was nothing but a fresh spurt to maintain a lead over his friends in the race to be different. It was a peculiar race, destined by its very nature to be endless ; a race motivated not by a competitive spirit among the runners but by their unanimous desire to be different, not from each other, but from fellow citizens in Amritsar.

As I visited Amritsar only occasionally, I could not watch this race from close quarters. In fact, even if I had lived in Amritsar or Uncle Manto had visited Lahore more often, the difference in our ages would have made it difficult for me to know all his activities. Then he left for Bombay and the gulf between us widened. It was several years before we met again. The occasion was his visit to Lahore in the December of 1940, when his first book of short stories, *Manto ke Afsane*, was being published. I heard him giving directions regarding the dust cover, which was to be dominated by a portrait sketch of his, showing him with his shirt collar open and head thrown back in an attitude of defiance and arrogance. "Let it be drawn in such a way," he told the publisher, "that it should provoke people to abuse me."

I cannot say whether he said this to over-awe his publisher or whether that was his view of the relationship that should exist between an author and his reading public. Personally, I think, the remark was not made deliberately and I doubt if Uncle Manto even remembers having made it, but it provides an important clue to his personality. His first object, perhaps, was to impress upon the publisher the fact that, in dealing with Manto, he should discard his standards for normal persons. What is more important, it showed Uncle Manto's aim to make his personality a part of his writings, because his study of literature must have convinced him that generally what

matters is not what is said but who said it. He had before him examples of writers like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, who won as much fame, or should I say notoriety, for their personalities as for their literary output. Uncle Manto was perhaps the first modern Urdu writer to have his picture on the dust cover of his book, as if to say: "I am as much the author of the personality of Manto as of his writings."

I doubt if anyone abused him, as he wanted, merely by looking at the dust cover of his book, which, incidentally, was designed by M. Esmail, the well known film star, though later on this desire of his must have been more than fulfilled. Actually Saadat Hasan himself, that is to say when he was still himself, must have abused his creation as roundly as anyone else. The responsibility for the creation was his, but while he had imagined himself a Pygmalion, his handiwork followed in the footsteps of Mr. Hyde or Frankenstein.

This monster, for in this context I can call him nothing else, has been on the rampage for several years now. Attempts to tame him have not been very successful and this is mainly due to his absolute inability to resist alcohol. To illustrate this, I will narrate an incident which involves hardly a few drops of whisky.

In August 1953, Uncle Manto was removed to the Mayo Hospital suffering from acute jaundice. The doctor soon discovered that he actually had cirrhosis of the liver from which affliction hardly one in a thousand recovers. I was in Murree at that time and on the day I was to return I received a telegram saying that his condition was grave. On arriving at Rawalpindi I telephoned Lahore and was informed that the doctors had given up the fight, that I would be too late and that he had been asking for me. Although I had been expecting some such end during the last few years, the news that it was now in sight came as a big shock. The fact that he had been asking for me, made it all the more poignant, for it filled me with the realisation that along with Manto, my Saadat *Mamujan* of the good old days also lay dying. It left me benumbed and helpless. The train journey by night seemed so futile, for the doctors had given him only a couple of hours more to live. In this train journey I thought of some other aspects of Uncle Manto's personality, the more lovable ones, which come

naturally to a person in an obituarist's frame of mind.

I remembered another train journey we had taken together from Lahore. He was going to Bombay while I was to accompany him only up to Delhi. His luggage contained no less than a dozen pairs of sandals and gold embroidered *juties*, which he always bought on his visits to Lahore and gave most of them away to his friends in the film industry. Footwear has always been an obsession with him. He not only wore the most expensive shoes, sandals and *juties* himself ; he loved giving them away. They always formed a topic of conversation for us. Whenever I went to Bombay I knew that he would come to the railway station to receive me in a new pair of shoes. I noticed them the moment we met, but a discussion on them was always postponed until we were in a taxi or *gharry*, where he would cross his legs and bring the shoes more prominently into the picture. He has never worn heavy shoes, for his feet are slim and almost effeminate. I do not remember having ever bought sandals for myself ; every summer under some pretext or the other a pair or two are passed on to me. This continued even during the days Uncle Manto was in acute financial difficulties ; days when nothing mattered except alcohol. At times it seemed to me that next to alcohol, footwear was his main interest in life. The last pair of sandals that I got from him was in exchange for a couple of razor blades.

I have always found him short of razor blades, because they are not difficult to buy. Tell him that a certain article or commodity has gone underground and his eyes will light up and he will take up the challenge and start making rounds of the black-market. When I mention this characteristic of his, I am referring to his Bombay days, where he always had lots of money and I think the more exorbitant the price he had to pay the greater the satisfaction he derived. When gold and silver-capped pens of the Parker and Shaeffer companies first came to India during the last war, Uncle Manto was a prolific buyer. He paid upto one hundred and fifty rupees for these models. He must have bought about ten of them, and with the exception of one which he kept for his personal use, he gave them all away. It was their novelty, rather than utility, that attracted him, for he seldom used them. To write radio

plays or film scenarios, he always uses his Urdu typewriter, which is a slower process but it gives him time to think, while for short stories and other articles he prefers a soft pencil which can help his hand keep pace with his thoughts. I have seen him write a complete short story in one sitting, in a room full of noisy children playing games and calling upon him to give rulings on disputed points, and also at the same time taking part in the general conversation of the others who may be his family members or visitors.

Why did he have to drink himself to death ? That was the question that repeated itself to me as I travelled to Lahore that night. Instead of feeling sorry for him, I felt angry with him. It was unfair of him to have done so. It had all along been a fight between his love for his family and the magnetism of alcohol, and alcohol had won hands down. In the last few weeks, I had suspected him of toying with the idea of suicide, either because it was the easiest way out or because he wanted to fill the family with remorse for having given him up as a hopeless case. I was certain that I would be too late for I had been told last night that he was already unconscious and in an oxygen tent.

It would be a defeat also for that astrologer in Bombay who had predicted a very long life for Uncle Manto but who had very correctly foretold bad times ahead. That was in 1946, when Uncle Manto was at the peak of his lucrative film career. The rot had set in almost immediately afterwards with a slump in the film industry, and on migration to Lahore after Partition his condition worsened. The astrologer had warned Uncle Manto that his *ketu* or something like that, was about to slip into a bad orbit and he would have seven lean years before all would be well with him again. I now read a new meaning into the astrologer's words. Perhaps he had meant that Uncle Manto would have a long life as a literary figure while his seven year bad period would come to an end with physical death.

I arrived at the hospital, bracing myself for the worst. I was met by a cluster of red-eyed relatives who told me that he was still alive. I could not ask any questions for there was a lump in my throat. I went into the ward and immediately stopped at the foot of his bed, which was nearest to the

door. I shall never forget what I saw.

On the bed was a skeleton of a man and all that I could see on his face, partially covered with shaving lather, was a pair of very prominent eyes, yellowed by jaundice. Yes, I said shaving lather, and the person leaning over him was no doctor's assistant either. He was the hospital barber and he was trying to hear what the patient was saying in his very feeble voice. With a great effort, Uncle Manto took a trembling bony hand up to his chin and moved his fingers across it. The barber then understood him. "Sahib says it is not smooth enough," he explained to us as he reached for his shaving brush. I went up to Uncle Manto, not knowing whether to cry or laugh. His insistence on being clean shaven, when he might not have lived another few hours, was an anti-climax. It was almost like the end of a Manto short story.

I met the doctors but they just shook their heads and said that the case was hopeless. They held on to this view for another two weeks in spite of the daily improvement shown by Uncle Manto. Statistics, they said, were against him, to say nothing of the various blood test reports. Being such a hopeless case, the doctors did not at once completely stop his whisky. His system was too used to it and they allowed him a few drops two or three times a day.

A day or two after my arrival from Murree, there was a mild sensation when a glass of diluted whisky disappeared from a side table near Uncle Manto's bed. Had it been thrown away by mistake or had one of the hospital attendants drained it off? No one knew. Uncle Manto was beyond suspicion. Most of the time he lay in a coma and when he was conscious, he could not even support a cigarette placed in his mouth. When the time for his afternoon quota came, he managed with his feeble gestures to attract attention and whisper a reminder. The attendant who bent down to hear what he was saying caught a faint smell of whisky coming from Uncle Manto. It was with great difficulty that he was made to confess that he had already had the drink. We asked him who had given it to him and learnt, to our astonishment, that he, whose fingers could not hold a cigarette for more than a few seconds, had raised himself on his elbow, picked

up the glass, which a careless nurse had left there before time, and after finishing it had replaced it on the table.

It showed amazing will-power but it also showed that his fight was not against the disease ; it was for it. The doctors were in despair, for the deterioration in his condition a few days earlier had followed a successful attempt by his bottle friends to smuggle in some whisky for him. The doctors then took a drastic step. They completely stopped his whisky.

This had just the effect I had anticipated. He started getting hallucinations. This had happened once before too. He had got up at the dead of night and started seeing things and talking about them. He had frightened us all, for it seemed as if he had lost his mind. When I came on the scene, he was insisting that his wife fry the huge fish that an Anglo-Pakistani neighbour had just sent him. On seeing me he took my hand and walked me out of the flat. He began shouting the name of the Anglo-Pakistani and it was with great difficulty that I dragged him back into the house. For the first few minutes I did not quite know how to deal with the situation and just mumbled a few answers to his questions. He was talking in the most terribly normal manner possible. The only thing wrong was the subject matter of his conversation. He wanted me to accompany him to another neighbour's house, where, he said, some singing girls were performing. He wanted to hear their Punjabi song which he repeated as he heard it.

Banking on his intelligence, I took a risk. I abruptly told him that he was in the grip of hallucinations, that the Anglo-Pakistani neighbour, who he thought had just given him the fish, had been transferred from Lahore over six months ago, that no one was singing anywhere in the vicinity and that the only sounds in the stillness of the night were our voices. After a moment's silence he said: "Then I suppose there are no sparrows fluttering their wings in that corner either ?"

I said: "No."

"The voice of the singing girls is still coming through. I'll write down the song." He did so for about a minute.

I said: "We can hear no such song."

He asked his wife and some other members of the family who had come to the sitting room whether they heard the song. They all said no. He stopped writing, but insisted that he could still hear the song. Gradually he began to distinguish reality from imagination, and just before he reluctantly went to bed, he said to me: "I am very sorry about that fish. It was a good fish."

I do not quite remember what had caused the hallucinations, but I think it was because he had suddenly given up both drink and food. At the hospital, the attack was worse and it lasted almost a week. Most of the time he imagined himself to be in Bombay, where he had spent the happiest period of his life. Every day I would tell him that he was in Lahore, but he found it very hard to believe that. Perhaps he did not want to believe it, for his stay in Lahore since Partition had been an unhappy one. His hallucinations moved in strange grooves. One day he read out to me an imaginary news item from a newspaper: "Reports have been received of a successful police raid on liquor shops. The police arrested six empty bottles, twenty-two playing cards and a dancing girl." I interpreted this as a denunciation by him, in his hallucinatory state, of the kill-joys around him.

He had come through the more dangerous part of his illness with courage and fortitude, but as he grew better, he began to feel peevish. He wanted to do all sorts of things that were forbidden ; he demanded tabooed food and drink that would have killed him in a few hours and he wanted to walk, which the doctors said he should not even think of attempting before another month or so. But the urge to walk was irresistible. He wanted to electrify the ward by his feat; he wanted to prove that Manto could do it. He made a clandestine attempt but it was as if he had stepped into a red hot ditch with legs of butter. They just melted away and he was lucky to escape with minor injuries when his bony frame struck the concrete floor.

This was but one result of his obstinacy. A twenty-four hour watch had to be kept on him. There was no knowing what he might do. His eyes and mind all the time seemed to be searching for a glowing coal on which he could step

bare-footed. His attitude during his peevish moods was of a person who, by getting well, was doing a good turn to his doctors and relatives. This attitude sometimes made me rather bitter towards him and this surprised the scores of his friends and fans who came to see him daily. Some of them wanted him to shift to some other bed, for he was in the same bed that Akhtar Shirani, the poet, had died some years earlier, while others did not like the ward itself for Uncle Manto's old friend, Abdul Bari, the well known historian, had also breathed his last there. My bitterness was mainly due to the apprehension that all this fight for his life would be in vain if he took to the bottle again. I hoped against hope that he would not, but his so called friends took only a couple of months to convince him that he never had cirrhosis or he would never have recovered and Uncle Manto was at the bottle again.

I found out the very day he had his first drink after his recovery, although he denied it vehemently. This also is a peculiar habit of his. He cannot hide the effects of even a peg of whisky or gin, but he deludes himself into thinking that he can hold his drink well. Any reference to this physical disability of his hurts his vanity. I wish he would realise that alcohol is damaging him in more ways than one. I would say it has ravaged his personality far more than his health.

Hardly ten years ago, his home was one of the happiest I have ever known. One hardly noticed what one ate at his dining table, for the main attraction was his witty conversation and the happy laughter of the family and friends gathered around it. He always had guests in his modest little flat in Bombay. What brought them there was his unobtrusive hospitality. If ever the guests out-numbered the beds, Uncle Manto was always the first to spread out his bedding on the floor. Sometimes he even ran short of floor space and he never hesitated to sleep on the old creaking planks of the narrow passage leading to the lavatory. He never made a show of his sacrifice, to say nothing of the inconvenience caused to his uncomplaining wife. The whole thing was managed in such a manner that the arrangement was accepted by all as natural.

I personally felt the first impact of his new personality at the dining table. He usually drank in the evenings and became unpleasant and aggressive in his conversation during dinner. Almost every evening we had sharp arguments over trifles and lost our tempers. I was perhaps unreasonable, because even under the influence of drink I expected him to behave normally. Whenever I visited Bombay, I came to dread the evenings, for I knew I would not be able to tolerate the alcohol-powered personality masquerading as Uncle Manto. The only way out was not to meet him in the evenings and that is what I did.

Since Partition we have been living in almost the same houses, my first floor being connected with his on the ground floor. His resistance to drink weakened and the proximity of a bar made it possible for him to drink throughout the day. His favourite route, which he thought was secret, was through the bathroom. Several times a day, he would proceed to the bathroom, bolt it noisily from inside, turn on the tap, quietly open the other door leading out of the flat, rush to the bar through the back lane, have a quick gin and return the same way. Once, on his return, he immediately began to talk about the tactical genius of General Rommel and I could not help imagining the German Commander in full uniform, riding a tank through the streets of Cairo on a secret reconnaissance before the El Alamein battle.

Later, with the coming of prohibition, the bar closed, but the bathroom still remained important in his alcoholic life. He usually hid his bottle there and went in every fifteen or thirty minutes to have a nip. Once I saw the bottle behind the commode. It filled me with pity for, when sober, nothing is more important to Uncle Manto than hygiene. He is known for his snow-white starched *kurta* and *payjama ;* his handwriting is neat and clean, he never types unless he has thoroughly cleaned his typewriter, he never writes on cheap or smudgy paper and he never eats off a plate that is not spotless or drinks from a glass that is not as clean; he would rather wash them himself. For such a person to drink straight from a bottle hidden behind a leaky flush commode is possible only when the compulsion must have a tremendous force.

Under such circumstances we stopped seeing each other even during the day and sometimes it was weeks before we came across one another. I was, of course, aware of his activities and most of them would have caused any normal person to boil with rage. He would be most irresponsible and unreasonable. He could not sleep at all during the nights and had to take a swig at the bottle every half hour or so. Sometimes his hazily made calculations would be wrong and in the middle of the night he would find himself without any drink left. Then the ordeal would begin for the family. One by one all of us would wake up to hear him shouting accusations at his wife, whom he suspected of having located the bottle and reducing its contents by pouring them down the sink.

Sometimes he would run out of cigarettes and he would keep on shouting for his servant every ten minutes asking him to go to the bazar and get him a packet. The servant's report, after his first attempt, that no shop was open would have no effect on him ; he would repeat his command at regular intervals until, through sheer exhaustion, he would doze off or fall into a sort of coma.

In the quiet night his almost incoherent shouting sounded terrible. At first all the family used to gather in his flat and try to persuade him to go to sleep, but this was given up when these persuasions had no effect on him. His nocturnal shouting and storming continued and as usual woke up his family and mine, but none of us left our beds any longer. We lay awake, our hearts pounding, not speaking a word, but with the same thoughts in our minds: when would his ordeal and ours end ? I cannot speak for the others, but I know that for me the ordeal will never end. Even when he was in hospital, any shout in the night was enough to wake me up and terrify me.

I have often wondered whether it is normal for a writer's family to pay some such price for his literary eminence. Uncle Manto knows all about his weaknesses and once he came out with an excuse, which some others, too, may offer on his behalf. He said that in order to write he must undergo various experiences however unpleasant and painful they might be. He may be right to a certain extent, but he would find it

difficult to list more than a dozen stories written by him under the influence of liquor. The fact is that he can write only when he is sober. I am aware of certain stories written by him during his lost days and their quality is such that he now even denies their authorship. Why then must he drink ?

Ask him the question and he will love to discuss it with you. He will probably even ask for help to fight the evil, readily offer himself for psycho-analysis and supply all the information required by his friend to make amateurish attempts to find out the causes and suggest remedies for his alcoholism. He will flatter and encourage them by agreeing with their conclusions and accepting their interpretations and make them feel that they are the first to treat his case scientifically and sympathetically. All the while he will be making regular trips to the hidden bottle and come back to encourage his friends to further psycho-analytical efforts and grow progressively unsteadier with every new promise that he would give up drinking for ever. After their departure, I suppose, he chuckles to himself as he did the day the bazars of Amritsar buzzed with the rumour about the Taj Mahal.

Only once in his life, as far as I remember, did Uncle Manto make a serious attempt to give up drinking. His condition was daily growing worse when his wife told him about my suggestion that he be taken to the Alcoholic Ward of the Punjab Mental Hospital for treatment. The next day, much to my surprise, I heard him call my name as I passed his room. I went in and found him in bed, his face turned away towards the wall to prevent me from seeing the real state he was in. He said : "I am prepared to go to the hospital, please make the arrangements."

I made an appointment for him for the very next day, but he disappeared some time before he was due to leave for the hospital and did not re-appear until several hours later. He had not balked at the last minute. The reason was quite different. He had heard that the Superintendent's fee was thirty-two rupees and had gone out to raise the amount. During his palmy days in Bombay, consulting the most expensive doctors, who charged sixty-four rupees for consultation alone, was almost a hobby with him. He once even took his servant to one such doctor with the intention of

paying the full fee. For the doctor the situation was novel; his clients were usually millionaires, who probably never even sent their poorer relations to him. He took only thirty-two rupees, half his normal fee.

Thirty-two rupees! That amount had now stood between him and the doctor. In those days he was not particular about whom he borrowed from. He got the money somehow and was admitted to the hospital, had a very difficult time for the first few days and came out after six weeks. He was effectively cured and did not drink again for about eight months. During that period he wrote almost a book a month; at times the rate was a story a day. Then he relapsed and the attack was worse than before. He was drunk all the time and since he was in that state he could not write. His earnings dropped to zero.

Uncle Manto then started on a course which distressed the family even more than his addiction to the bottle. He began borrowing money indiscriminately. The amount or the person never mattered. He touched relatives, friends, neighbours and, I would say, even strangers, for he could not resist borrowing even from fans who came to pay their respects to him. He was almost on a never-ending binge during 1952 and up to August 1953, when he was removed to hospital for cirrhosis of the liver. During that period, we once took him to the Mental Hospital by force, but he refused to co-operate and the hospital authorities had to let him go home after a couple of days, for under the rules of their institution they could not treat any sane person against his will. Uncle Manto was very bitter towards the family after that. But then in those days he hardly knew what he was doing. I remember those days as vividly as a nightmare. His eldest daughter fell seriously ill and I noted with dismay that this made not the slightest impression on him. His drinking had never before been as bad as this. He has always professed great love for his children and has shown it in many ways. For instance, he has never failed to rally in time for Pakistan Day celebrations. Like most other intellectuals, he cannot make a flag of his patriotism and flutter it from his house-top, but he wants his children to do so. He has always sobered up for Pakistan Day, bought buntings and with the

help of the delighted children put up the little flags all over the front of his flat and mine. Last time a daughter of his fell ill,he had nursed her himself and dedicated a book to her.

When his eldest daughter was down with typhoid, he must have been vaguely aware of the fact that there was little money in the house and that the treatment was bound to be expensive. That evening he borrowed money in the name of his daughter, but when he came home it was with a bottle of whisky rather than the vital medicines. It was alcohol's most important victory to date. He must have been full of remorse and self-condemnation, for he tried to make up by demonstrating his love for the stricken child. In spite of his wife's protests, he sat unsteadily on the bed, his long hair falling all over the face and tried to lift the child on to his lap and overwhelm her with paternal affection. When his wife dragged him away from the bed, he was enraged ; he was determined to exercise his parental right even if it meant resorting to violence. Before he could do so, my wife, who was a witness, unexpectedly lost her temper, probably for the first time in her mild-mannered life. That came as a terrible shock to Uncle Manto. He sobered down immediately and quietly went away to his room.

Next morning we found him extremely weak, for he had again given up drinking. There was sunshine again in the Manto home and everyone basked in it, hoping to make it permanent. Vitamin tablets and tonics appeared on his bedside table. Another periodical cycle began in Uncle Manto's life and soon he was pottering about the house ; having the broken chairs repaired, selling empty bottles and old newspapers, an old hobby of his, fixing a swing for the children, making a huge bird-house and stocking it with love-birds, hiring carpenters and masons to repair various things and parts of the house, making sofa sets for the children with empty cigarette cartons and taking full part in discussions on all domestic and family matters.

In these discussions Uncle Manto always reveals himself as a conservative and almost a reactionary on issues like female education and mixed social gatherings. Whenever he expresses his views on these matters, I cannot help identifying him with a character he has had in mind for over ten

years but has not yet written about him. The character is a *goonda*, who is the terror of the town and has a hand in almost every murder, robbery, abduction and assault; but no sooner does he enter the *mohalla* in which he lives than a transformation takes place. He no longer walks erect, his eyes are on the ground, the children call out to him to play with them and he obliges, the elders have but to command and their wishes are fulfilled, he does not look at women but if he hears that anyone has dared even to smile at a girl in his *mohalla*, God help the Majnu !

But the sunshine in the Manto home does not last for long. No sooner has his strength been built up, which the family hopes he will use to resist alcohol, than he succumbs to temptation again.

Usually the cause of these relapses are his companions. I have deliberately not used the word friends because there is a dividing line between his real friends who always remain in the background, becuase they do not approve of his drinking and because they are free and frank with him in other matters as well. He prefers to have around him companions who can assure him at frequent intervals that he is a great writer and a great personality, whom even cirrhosis could not touch. They have been a very bad influence on him. With them he is always the centre of attraction and he can snub or insult them as he pleases. He must have undivided attention even if he has to stand up on his chair and demand it.

One evening, after the Pakistan Cricket Team had returned from its tour of India, Uncle Manto heard that some of the team members, including Waqar Hasan and Mahmood Hussain, had come to call on me. Although he was in a condition in which he never came to my flat, he turned up to meet the cricketers. He was introduced, after which he sat along with several others listening to what the cricketers had to say about their Indian tour. But how long could Uncle Manto take a back seat ? I use the term in a figurative sense, for he was actually sitting in a chair in the inner ring, in which also sat the cricketers. Hardly five minutes after his arrival, he slipped down from his chair, sat on the carpet in the centre of the room, stopped Mahmood Hussain in the middle of a sentence and said : "I know all fast bowlers are

frauds. Come on demonstrate to me how you bump the ball." Waqar Hasan also had to show to Uncle Manto how he played some of his "fraud" strokes. The rest of the evening was dominated by Uncle Manto ; the other fans did not get a chance to have a word with the Test cricketers.

Why this desire to focus the spotlight on himself ? My explanation for it is that in the last few years he has lost much prestige at home and among his relatives and friends. This has hurt him more than he would ever admit. He is hungry for love and affection and when he does not get it, he falls back on drawing attention to himself. It is a poor substitute, but it is better than being ignored altogether. For the family and his true friends I would say that they want to return the love and affection he has given them ungrudgingly and unselfishly in his happier days ; all they want is a chance, a chance to return it to the right personality. His attitude seems to be: "Love Saadat Hasan ; forgive and forget Manto." This is not unacceptable, only experience has shown that Manto usually leads Saadat Hasan by the nose.

Also, Uncle Manto has all along been aware of the ramifications of his self-made personality. I came to know this in rather interesting circumstances. I was in Bombay and was invited by Ashok Kumar and Savak Vacha of Bombay Talkies to give my views on a screen play Uncle Manto was writing for them. It was a powerful story, but the role tailored for Ashok Kumar, who was to be the hero, was completely over-shadowed by another personality, an alcoholic and sadist. I vigorously advocated reducing the importance of this character, but Uncle Manto was adamant. During the discussion he happened to leave the room for a few moments and Ashok Kumar at once whispered to me: "What are you doing, don't you know he is to act that role himself?" But that did not stop me from saying what I wanted to. I was as frank and harsh as I have been in this article, which Uncle Manto has read, as it was being written, page by page, without a single protest. Ultimately, in that discussion Uncle Manto said that he wanted to act the role himself, because he had based the character on himself. In the screen play that character was killed by his own mother.

The only meaning I can read into this is his realisation

that the only person who can end the dangerous trends in the Manto personality is its creator, Saadat Hasan himself. Some of his fans may fear that this would mean the end of his literary career. I do not agree. In fact I think such a change would lead to the widening of his canvas. The family, particularly his wife, would not be very sorry even if he had to change his profession. So far as they are concerned, he may as well be a carpenter. The snobs and highbrows may cry sacrilege, but my sympathies are with the family. Appreciating literature is one thing, producing it for bread and butter is quite another, particularly in a country where a best-selling writer like Uncle Manto hardly gets more than fifty rupees for a short story.

Uncle Manto has earned more money in the field of literature than any other Urdu writer of his time. Unlike most others, he is entirely dependent on his pen for his living. The secret of Uncle Manto's literary success is his effective combination of the work of an author and a super-salesman. Both occupations are strenuous, taxing his mind and sapping his vitality. In Uncle Manto's case the strain is continuous. He perhaps first stuck to liquor as a tonic to revitalise himself. This started a vicious circle. His way of living has always been expensive ; he loved to engage taxis when buses could have served the purpose, whatever he bought was of the best quality ; clothes, pens, paper, cigarettes, shoes, neckties, railway accommodation and medical advice. All was well so long as the film companies paid him handsomely for his screen plays and scenarios. But then came the slump in the Indian film industry and his migration to Pakistan. To earn more he had to write more; to write more he felt he must have more of his self prescribed tonic; the more he drank the less he wrote; the less he wrote the more worried he became; the more worried he became the more he drank to forget his worries.

That is the nature of the whirl-pool in which Uncle Manto now finds himself struggling hard to prevent himself from being drawn deeper into the vortex. He is no longer happy, for unlike the fire-walking exploit there is now no applause and what is worse, on touching his feet, he finds that after all these years blisters have now made their appearance. But

he is now struggling hard for existence, both physical and spiritual. Occasionally, the struggle is weakened by a relapse caused by a bottle thrown into the whirl-pool by unwise friends, but it is firmer and more consistent than it was before his last and almost fatal visit to the hospital.

To restore his family's confidence in him, he has done several things to keep himself in check and break out of the vicious circle and perhaps force his *ketu* into a more auspicious orbit. He has assigned to his wife all his rights in his writings, past, present and future. All accounts are now in his wife's name. He cannot now borrow even a rupee from any publisher, unless his wife signs the receipt. But his wife is still not reconciled to literature. She has had to pay too heavy a price for Uncle Manto's success and notoriety. If Uncle Manto has suffered in the cause of literature, she has suffered more. It was not surprising, therefore, for me to learn of her concern, genuine and grave, on hearing that I too had literary pretensions and was developing into a writer. She said to my wife, her youngest sister: "I hope this is not true! Pray that he may never be a writer or you'll regret it all your life."

[Saadat Hasan Manto died in January, 1955, a few months after this was written.]

THERE IS HOPE

SHAMSUDDIN ABUL KALAM

Our country is primarily agricultural. Most of our people are cultivators. They are neither Aryans nor Arabs. Their body and their mind have been formed by the soft soil of East Pakistan, by its wide blue sky, its murmuring rivers, its warm benevolent sun, its pleasant breeze and its splendid seasons. Nature has given their mind and body a distinctive stamp. Depending so largely on the bounties of nature, they are naturally a God-fearing people. But they have to struggle against many enemies to be able to keep alive. In the world of nature, they have to fight against flood and famine, and the savage depredations of wild animals. In the past they fought against foreign aggressors. There were enemies inside, too, inherent in the very social structure. The land-lords and the money-lenders and the system of caste were great obstacles to the growth and development of our people. But their spirit was not crushed by these obstacles. They did not lose their identity nor did they give up their struggle against great odds. This splendid, unconquerable spirit led eventually to the emancipation of the country from foreign rule.

We are a free people now ; but have our problems been solved ? True, we have abolished the notorious land system known as the Permanent Settlement ; many development projects have also been started ; but the majority of the people still live in poverty. Their lot has to be changed. It is not possible to improve the lot of the common man to a very great degree quickly. That is true. But what is painful is the

absence of sincere, honest and generous efforts to do so on the part of the new rich and the middle class society that has grown up in recent years in our country, in and around the cities.

But it is heartening to find that the serious creative artists are giving serious thought to this matter. Their awareness of the social problems is still disconnected and segmented. But it is there and is constantly growing.

In the field of literature can be detected one of the earliest signs of the slow growth of this awareness. All our contemporary novelists and short story writers in East Pakistan show more or less this awareness in their writings. This is present in the older writers, though it is more marked in the new, younger ones. Their work reflects contemporary life and its problems. They also reveal an awareness of the need to think of the good of mankind at large. What is a pity, however, is that most of their stories are scattered in the pages of different periodicals. Few of them have been published in the form of books. Incidentally, I may mention here the very great dearth of enterprising publishing houses here. Almost all of our publishers are primarily busy printing school and college text books and making easy money. There are some exceptions, though. A few publishers are regularly publishing the works of our novelists and short story writers after buying the copyright. Some new publishing houses, with ideas and enterprise, are also growing up. Recently, after the Government took over the task of publishing the text books, some old aristocratic publishing houses have also been showing some interest in creative literature. But most of them are still concentrating on publishing books that would easily appeal to our young adoloscent middle class mind and would sell quickly. The more serious of our creative writers do not, naturally, feel very happy in the present circumstances.

The proper assessment of our contemporary writing has been made very difficult by the absence of such writings in book form. You can hardly do justice to a writer by reading a story of his in one periodical and finding another story after quite a while in another periodical. Nevertheless, certain trends in our contemporary fictional writings are quite noticeable.

We can detect these trends in the treatment of social questions in our fiction, namely, Marxian, Islamic and liberal

humanistic. The writers representing all these three trends show a great love for the country and its people. Their angle of vision is, however, different because of their mental make-up, and the influences they grew up in.

Towards the end of British rule, Marxian thought quite naturally spread in this part of Asia. Many writers were influenced by the Marxian ideology. The prevailing inequalities in our society, and in the system of production and distribution of wealth, also awakened their interest in that ideal of life. Though the Marxian ideology has lost much of its appeal today and has grown out-dated to a large extent, yet it has considerably influenced some of our writers. In their writings we often find the lack of real feeling for life. They frequently betray a spirit of indignation and sentimentalism. Trying to serve a social or political purpose, they turn their art into propaganda and degrade it. Naturally their work often becomes merely topical and contemporary. Alauddin Al-Azad is subtler whereas Showkat Osman is rather blunt, though he has a light manner. Both of them are conscious artists ; but one of them is a little restless, the other more restrained. Leaving aside their faults and weaknesses, one easily admits that they have written some excellent short stories. Incidentally, let me mention a story by each. In Showkat Osman's story *Faut*, published in the first issue of *Shamakal*, he tells the story of Shah Waliullah Gorakhpuri. While returning from Mecca after performing the pilgrimage, he falls ill on the ship and dies unattended while his three wives quarrel by his sick bed over the right of nursing him. In this story, Showkat Osman is not eager to establish a thesis nor is his vision coloured by personal indignation. Alauddin Al-Azad's short story *Shamatal*, published again in *Shamakal*, reveals a deep truth about contemporary life and society, though its organisation is a little loose. Here the author has depicted a fine picture of how honesty and good intentions are defeated under pressure of poverty and other unhappy circumstances of a lower middle class life. It appears that Azad is also trying to extend his vision beyond the merely Marxian point of view. If these two writers tried to see life more deeply and more fully, our literature would be considerably enriched. It is necessary for them to acquire broader attitude towards humanity, transcending their class-consciousness. Another writer of this group, Mr. Sirajul Islam, has written

a fine short story against the background of the language movement. He has shown the qualities of a genuine artist in that story. Others of this group hardly merit serious discussion. Their ideas are foggy, characterisation laboured and treatment of problems unreal.

The other group, which treats our social questions from the Islamic point of view, is very small. They have not created any successful novel or short story. We get a rather definite point of view in some novels of the pre-Independence period written with an Islamic bias, like *Anwara*, *Manwara* or *Abdullah*. We have not yet created any successful novels like these in the post-Independence period. Whether Akbar Husain, the author of *Ki Paini* and *Mohamukti*, should be considered as one belonging to this class is debatable. Some think that Ashrafuzzaman's *Manzil* belongs to this category of writing. These novels are not, however, very effective or successful as genuine literature. They can only be mentioned in a historical survey of our literature. Personally, I think that this talk about the Islamic point of view in the treatment of social questions in our literature is rather dated for two reasons. First, this group does not give any importance to the pre-Islamic culture of this country. But it will not do. Nor is it fair. No good can come of denying the culture that has evolved out of the soil. Secondly, the point of view termed Islamic, and as expressed by these writers is tinged with medievalism. The wider implications of Islam, that emphasised the search for truth, beauty and universal love, are not their concern. Their attitude is narrow, sectarian, limited and puritanical. This trend, however, is consistently and gradually on the wane.

The real artists among our contemporary fictional writers fall beyond the pale of the two groups discussed so far. They try to view life as a whole and are not concerned with the dogmatic aspect of it. They are not engrossed merely in any class interpretation. They, too, are aware of the many problems in our society, of the many evils and inequalities existing all around us. But they want freedom and happiness for all sections of the people. The artistic quality of their writings is not always equal, but the truly successful novels and short stories that we have in East Pakistan today are their creations. Prominent among them are Syed Waliullah, Abu Ishaque, Shahed Ali, Mahbubul Alam, Abul Fazal, Shahid Saber, Zahir

Raihan, Daulatunnesa Khatun, Abu Rushd, Mirza Muhammad Abdul Hye, Mobinuddin Ahmed and Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury.

In his novel *Lal Shalu*, Syed Waliullah has drawn a beautiful picture of how our simple common men are mercilessly exploited in the name of religion. A clear vision, depth of feeling and thought and sympathy have made *Lal Shalu* an outstanding novel of our times. It is, however, true that if the novel could rise above the vagueness of its last section, it would have been a much more remarkable piece of work. Still, inasmuch as it contains an exposure of a major evil in our society and treats an important social question of our times artistically, it is a significant novel. Pictures of social problems can be found in many of Waliullah's short stories too. I shall draw attention particularly to his story *Ekti Tulshi Gacher Kahini*. In this story he has dealt with a problem which none has dared to approach in contemporary East Pakistan. It is not only one of Waliullah's finest stories but also one of the very finest short stories in East Pakistan's literature. Here the author has placed the artist in him above all considerations and therein lies the secret of his success. Abu Ishaque is another successful artist of this kind. In *Shurja Dighal Bari*, he has treated of the problems of the common man, who lives in perpetual want and poverty, with great sympathy and sensitiveness. Incidentally, there is in this novel a picture of the problems that arise out of divorce. *Shurja Dighal Bari*, may not be called a regular novel, in the strict sense of the word, but it is certainly an excellent narrative, embodying significant human emotions and meeting the requirements of good art. The feeling of love for life characterises some of Shahed Ali's stories, too. Mention may be made in this context of his story *Fashal Tolar Kahini*. Employing vivid pictorial imagery, he depicted the picture of the problem-ridden life of the peasant of North Bengal in that story. His stories are mostly built around the problems of poverty that complicate the life of the poor peasant. But lately, after his entry into active politics, he has been neglecting his creative literary work. Shahid Saber, another young writer, displays a happy combination of intellect and emotion in some of his stories. His emphasis on the human element in the treatment of social questions promises a bright future for him. Consider in this context, his story called *Ek Tukro Megh*. The story is built around the problem of unemployment. But the theme

has been treated with a feeling of love and sympathy for life and not from any propagandist motive. In another story *Deal*, he ably treated the problem of barriers created between man and man by various systems. Shahid Saber does not want to make an easy, cheap appeal. That is his strong point. In other writers of this category also we notice this emphasis on the human element. They try to deal with social problems, mainly the problem of poverty and of the unequal distribution of the country's wealth, with sympathy. Of them, Zahir Raihan has a distinctive quality of his own, in the matter of both analysis of problems and characterisation. If he concerns himself a little less with the emotions of love, a promising writer like him will be able to produce really fine stories and novels.

It is difficult for me to give an adequate and a full discussion of all our writers within the short compass of my paper. I have, however, tried to say a few words in my own way. I, too, have dealt with some of our contemporary social questions in my short stories and novels. I have treated the problems of poverty and privation in the lives of the peasants, of the problems of emancipation of common man from the exploitations of the landed aristocracy and the money-lenders, as well as of the problems of the heart. The verdict of the reader would be the last word on the quality of such works. I can only say that I believe in a thorough, searching and sympathetic treatment of the social questions. When I have dealt with the problems in the lives of the neglected poor peasants of East Pakistan, I have done so not with the specific purpose of bringing about immediate social changes, but because I was impelled by a wider love of life Life to me is a mixture of the joy of union and the pain of separation, and ennobled by love. I have tried in my own way to depict some aspects of that life.

If, when all is said and done, we agree that the source from which all great literature springs is a genuine love of life, then East Pakistan fictional writings would be enrichedin proportion as that love is genuinely felt and expressed by its writers. That would depend on the proper realisation of the values of life. This applies as much to our readers as to our writers. Only in such conditions can the treatment of social questions in our literature be attractive.

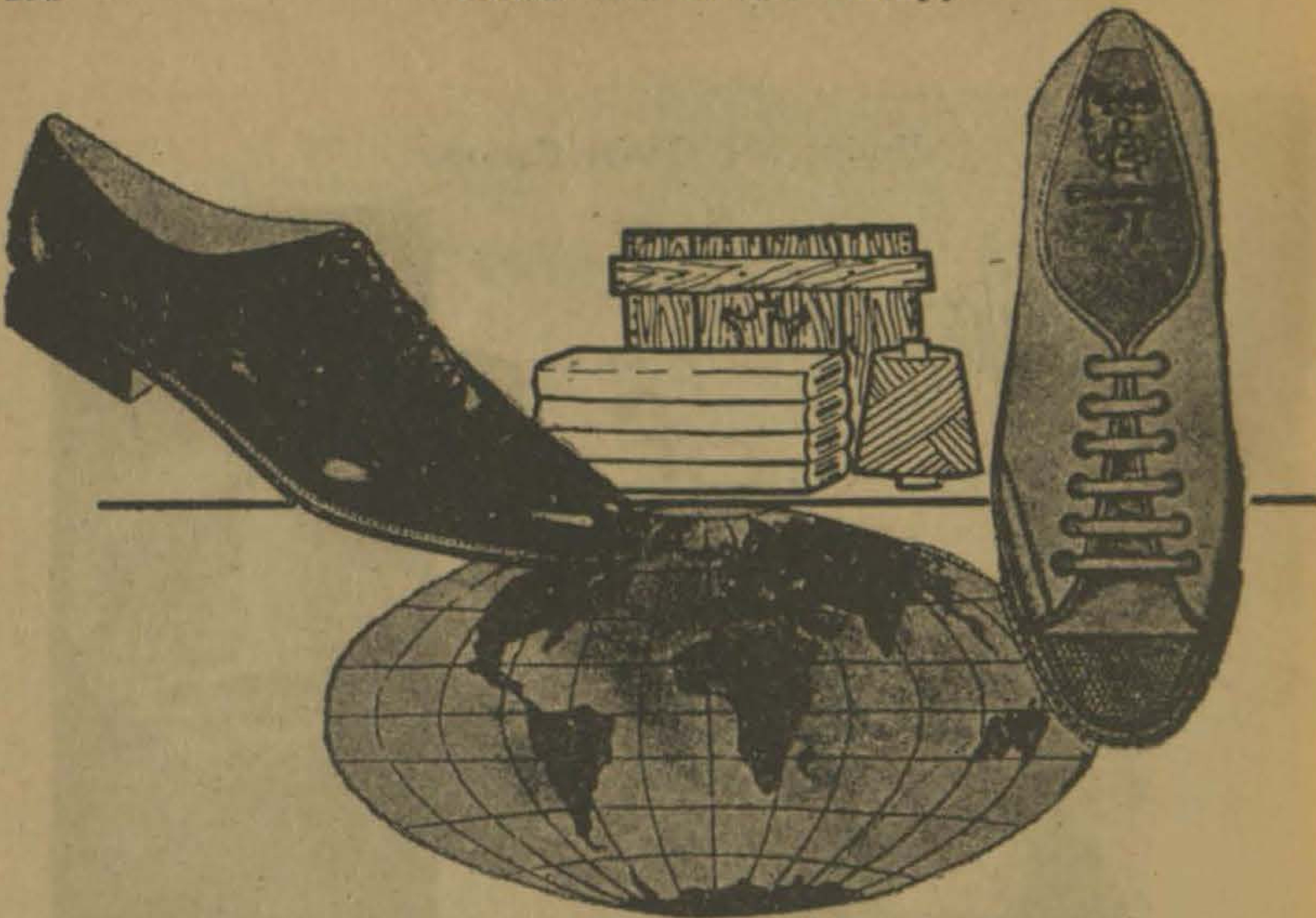
Fictional writing in East Pakistan is still in its infancy. But it has a bright future ahead, for Nature and the environ-

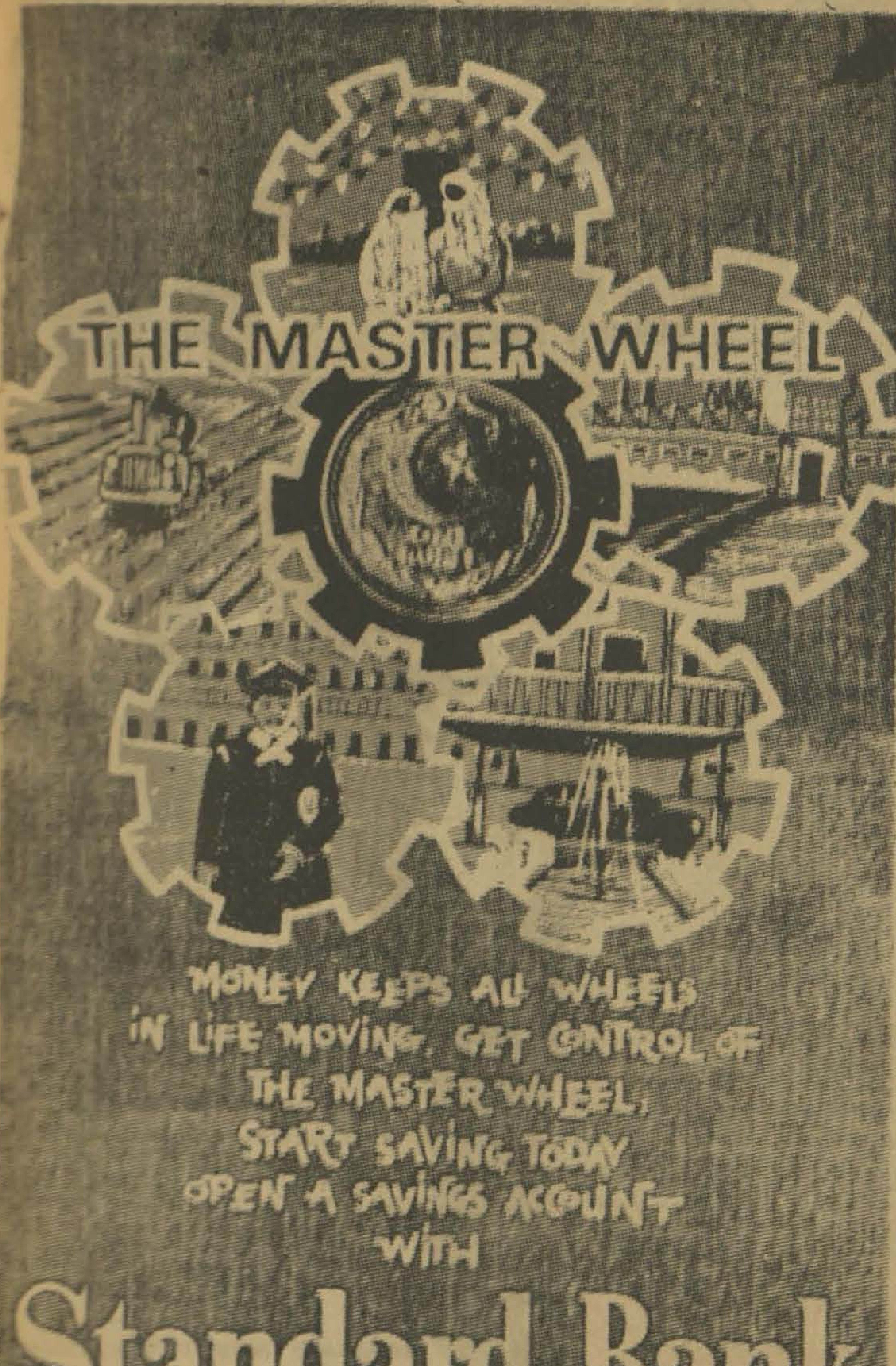
ments of this country are particularly conducive to the realisation of the greater values of life. It is not difficult to find support for this hope in the folk songs and ballads written by the common men of our villages. In this context it is necessary to remember that the successful growth and development of art depneds on a particular stage of advancement and progress in the country as a whole; at least on the realisation of the need for such progress. When that happens through education and the removal of social and political inequities, the treatment and analysis of social questions in contemporary novels and short stories will be more satisfactory.


End.

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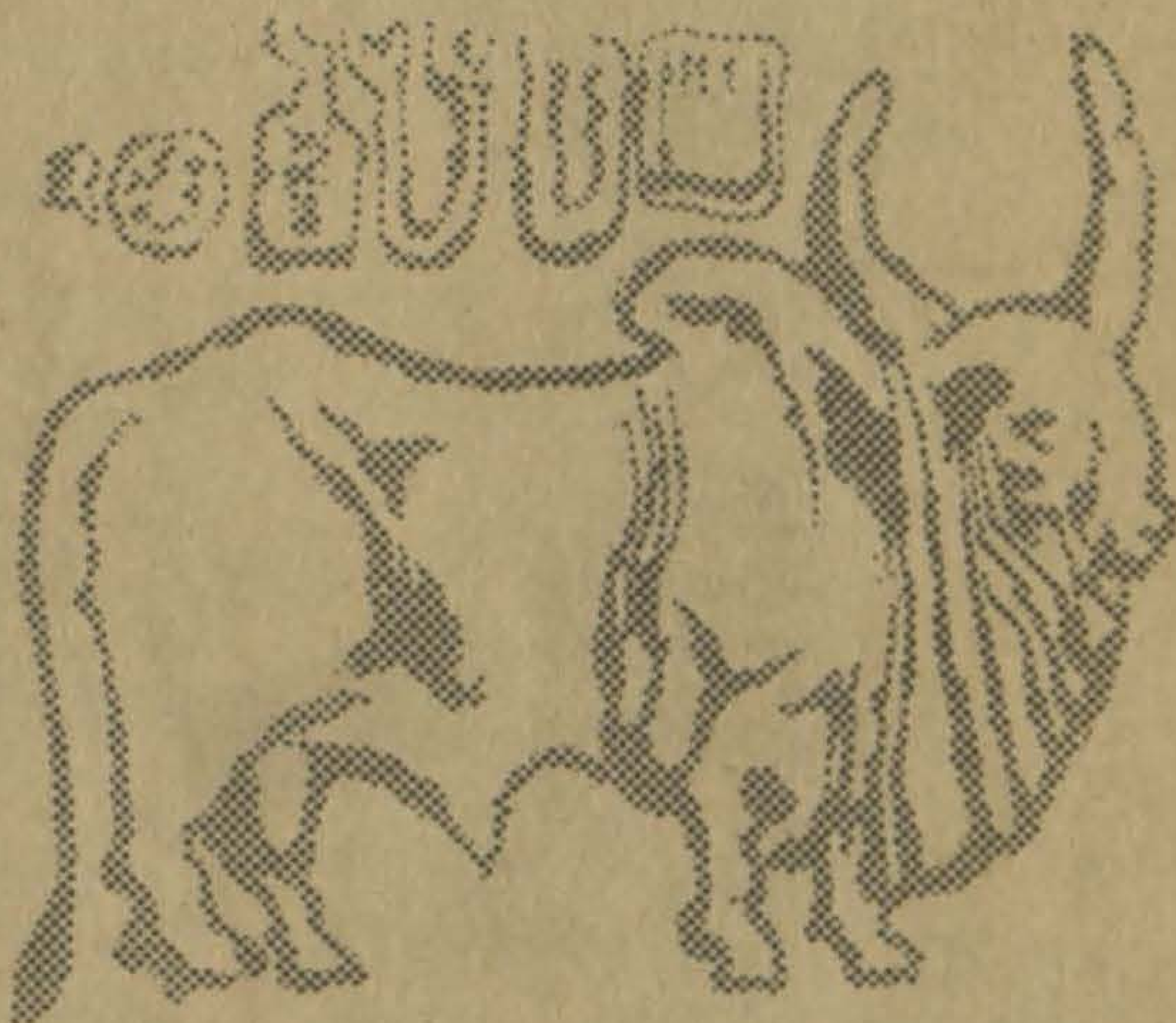

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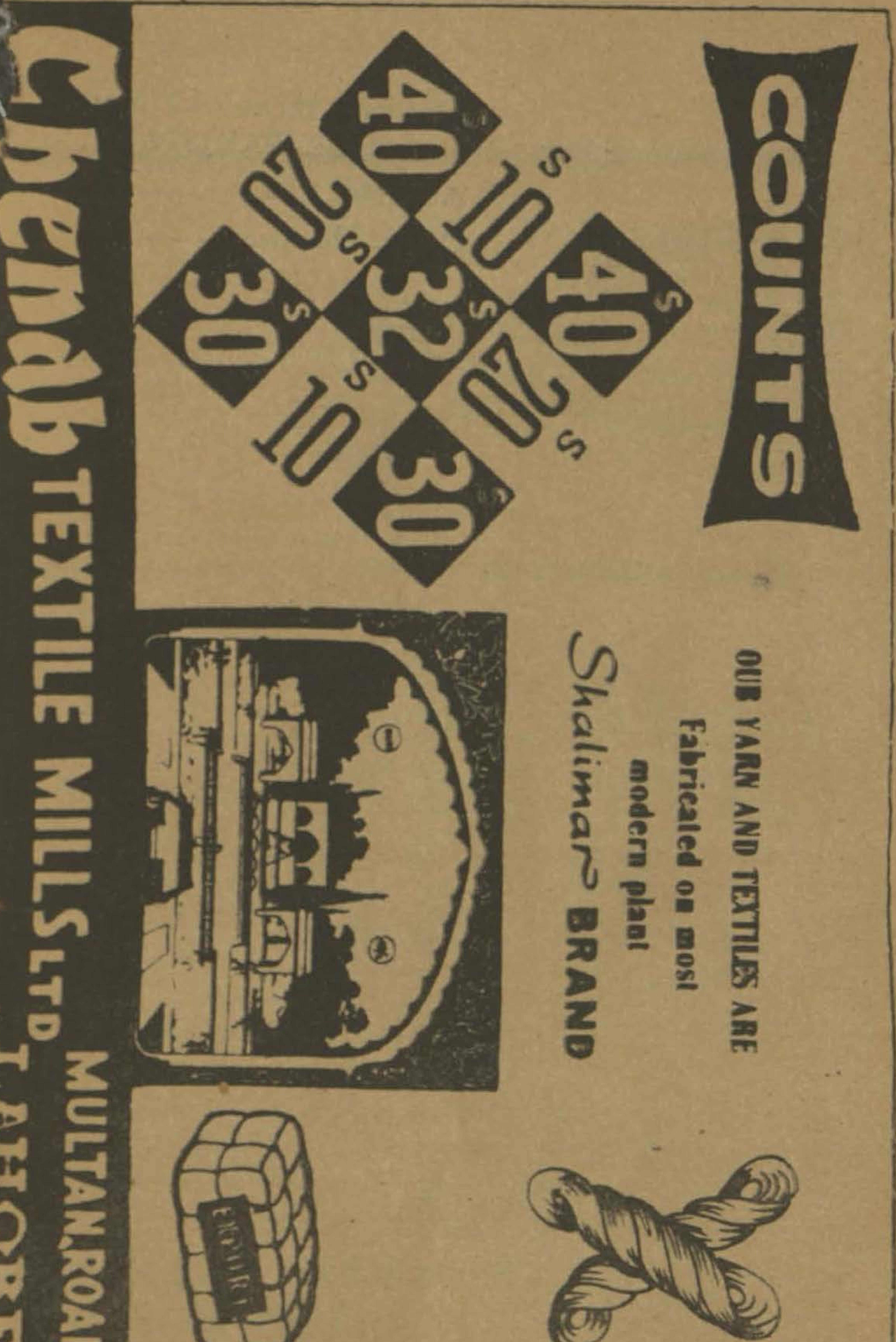

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